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‘Curating Street Food Markets’

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Abstract

Although eating on the street and food sharing have long been features of urban life in recent years street food markets have become increasingly popular in cities around the world. While the size, formality and success of these markets may differ, each offers an atmosphere consisting of material and immaterial elements including the food, traders, consumers, aesthetics, sights, smells, sounds and connections to places and heritage. Existing literature asserts that atmospheres are assembled, and consumption experiences are staged, yet the actors and activities involved in these processes remain poorly understood in general and with respect to street food markets in particular. Drawing on 9 months of ethnographic fieldwork involving participant observation and interviews, this paper examines the curatorial practices of street food market organisers in London. It demonstrates how they attune their curatorial practices to consumer preferences and commercial imperatives. Rather than promoting 'good' food, the paper asserts that these curators match demand with 'appropriate' 1) spaces, 2) food and 3) people to generate attractive atmospheres and valuable consumption experiences.

1: Introduction

It is lunchtime on a cold winter's day at a street food market in London. We walk with Nick and Toby, who are market organisers for EAT-LONDON, one of the city's major food market organising businesses. They are looking for a vegetarian trader who was recommended on Twitter to try their food and evaluate their suitability for one of their markets. As we enter the market from a side street the atmosphere instantly changes. The noises from chatting and aromas from the food fill the space. Two lines of stalls on each side sell different products, from hot meals, fruits and vegetables to clothes, bags and electronics. At the end of the market, we find

the vegetarian stall. It is just one trader in a red gazebo with a table; there is a blackboard menu with three daily specials written on it. We order everything on the menu to share; a round bun filled with roasted potato, mozzarella, nachos and coriander; a drowned sub bun filled with black beans, avocado, and coriander and completely covered with a very spicy chilli sauce, and a salad box, consisting of bulgur wheat, avocado, tomato, cucumber and jalapeños.

Whilst we wait for our orders, and without telling the trader who he is or why he has come, Nick improvises an undercover job interview. 'How long have you been in this market?' 'What's inside the bread?' 'Where did you get the inspiration to do this?' 'Have you got a Twitter account?' As we eat while walking down the street Nick and Toby start exchanging thoughts about the menu. The drowned sandwich is especially tricky, chilli sauce runs through our fingers; Toby thinks it's too spicy. Nick says that the buns are not toasted, minus one point. However, the potato sandwich and the fresh and creamy salad ease the heat of the other dishes. Nick says this trader is perfect for EAT-LONDON: "very clever, original, stall looks tidy and clean and he's not using a meat replacement (such as soy burgers) to fill the vegetarian buns but creative fillings, which is a game changer in vegetarian street food". They want him to join their collective but where to put him? Toby suggests a weekly pitch at the King's Cross market but Nick says it is too soon and would rather move him to one the EAT-LONDON markets for a trial run.

A few weeks later we do a second trip to the market and come across a trader doing Vietnamese food, specifically Banh Mi, a baguette sandwich with different meat or tofu fillings and vegetables. Although the food was delicious, the trader is not deemed suitable for EAT-LONDON as they are inexperienced, barely had a sign with the name of the stall and lacked a Twitter account or website. When asked about their selection process, Nick explains:

> "I can be walking through a market and I've got a sense of who's good, very quickly, before even eating it. You can see from the way they express themselves and the food offering. But even forgetting about the food, there are definitely people that we see that are ready to be an EAT-LONDON trader, they're quite dynamic, and business minded, there is a sense of poise or professionalism… All these things reveal yourself as being a step above the rest of the market… It's quite hard to put into words but it's kind of like a feeling, you can sense it".

Although eating on the street and food sharing have long been features of urban life, recently street food markets have become increasingly popular in cities around the world (Davies and Evans, 2019; Marovelli, 2019). While the size, formality and success of these markets may differ, each offers an atmosphere consisting of objects, bodies and spaces (Anderson, 2009; Marovelli, 2019; Montefrio and Sin, 2021; Shaw, 2014). As the vignette above demonstrates, these atmospheres consist of a range of material and immaterial elements including the food, traders, consumers, aesthetics, sights, smells, sounds and connections to places and heritage (Arthur and Hracs, 2015; Pike, 2011; Wijngaarden and Hracs, 2023). Crucially, street food markets and their atmospheres are not naturally occurring, organic or effortless. Yet, while existing literature asserts that atmospheres are assembled; and consumption experiences are staged (Hracs and Jakob, 2015; Lorentzen and Jeannerat, 2013; Montefrio and Sin, 2021), the work behind the scenes remains poorly understood and there is a need to explore the actors and activities involved (Koren and Hracs, 2023; Shaw, 2014).

This paper examines the curatorial practices of street food market organisers in London. Drawing on 9 months of ethnographic fieldwork involving participant observation and interviews, it introduces these poorly understood curators as reflexive and strategic actors who

produce attractive atmospheres and valuable consumption experiences. The paper demonstrates how market organisers attune their curatorial practices to consumer preferences and commercial imperatives. Rather than promoting 'good' food, these curators match demand with 'appropriate' spaces, food and people to attract, engage and satisfy their audiences.

After reviewing relevant literature on atmospheres and curation, the first empirical section explores how market organisers curate space at different scales. It highlights the considerations behind 'placing' markets in particular neighbourhoods and how market atmospheres are assembled through the combination of material and immaterial elements, including aesthetics, lighting, sounds and smells. The section also explains how market organisers use micro spaces to manage flows, arrange food traders, engineer social interactions and stage a sense of discovery. The second empirical section examines the curation of appropriate food within the markets. Attention is paid to the importance of taste, visual appeal, sustainability, traceability and practical considerations but also uniqueness and authenticity. Selected traders generate attractiveness and value by combining material and immaterial elements including ingredients and artisanal methods of preparation as well as associations with history, culture and place. The third empirical section reveals how market organisers curate three groups of people – traders, support staff and consumers – who co-produce and co-promote the market experiences through their presence and practices. Once again, appropriateness is key as the identities, narratives, aesthetics and performances of selected traders must match the expectations of organisers and consumers. Likewise, while DJs are meant to be seen, other workers including cleaners are required to remain hidden. Finally, consumers are needed to generate revenue but market organisers curate appropriate audiences depending on the qualities of each market location to add value and distinction to the experience. In the moment, consumers contribute by eating and

socialising with others, but interactions and value creation also occur in virtual spaces such as social media platforms. The section asserts that bodies are not passive or merely 'caught' in atmospheres but active ingredients who market organisers curate and strategically enrol.

The paper contributes to existing bodies of literature in several ways. It nuances our understanding of the processes and spatial dynamics of curation. The focus on market organisers and food cart traders sheds light on the practices of two poorly understood curators in the food-related marketplace. Learning about how their commercial motivations shape their aims and curatorial practices builds on existing work which considers 'why' curation is performed and provides a valuable contrast to actors who perform curation for intrinsic, cultural, environmental or societal reasons in the food-related marketplace and other sectors including music (Goodman and Jaworska, 2020; Jansson and Hracs, 2018; Joosse and Hracs, 2015).

Street food markets add a novel case to understanding 'where' curation is performed alongside other physical, temporary and virtual 'foodscapes', such as restaurants, food trucks, farm shops, supermarkets, farmers markets, blogs, websites and social media accounts (Arthur and Hracs, 2015; Fendrychová and Jehlička, 2018; Goodman and Jaworska, 2020; Joosse and Hracs, 2015; Wessel, 2012). But the findings from street food markets also contribute to nascent studies which examine the ways in which spaces not only contain but shape the nature, qualities and outcomes of curation (Hracs and Webster, 2021; Jansson, 2019; Jansson and Hracs, 2018; Joosse and Hracs, 2015). By extension, the paper adds to our knowledge of how places are produced, atmospheres are assembled, and experiences are staged (Bille et al., 2015; Concha, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022; Hracs and Jakob, 2015; Kolehmainen and Mäkinen, 2021; Koren and Hracs, 2023; Lorentzen and Jeannerat, 2013; Montefrio and Sin, 2021; Shaw, 2014; Wijngaarden and Hracs, 2023). Crucially, the paper highlights the processes through which a range of material

and immaterial elements are strategically and intentionally combined and layered to produce distinction and value.

2.1: Atmospheres and Experiences

Although we live in atmospheres, move through them, talk about them and ultimately experience them, they are difficult to capture or conceptualise (Sumartojo and Pink, 2019). But put simply, atmospheres connect people, places and things and are often thought of as the 'feel' of spaces, or the 'sense of place' they convey (Bille et al., 2015). Individuals perceive and experience physical qualities such as size, materials and objects but spaces also envelop individuals with affective effects. Spaces can feel cozy, grand, filled with tension, homely, or 'buzzing' (Anderson, 2009). Importantly, atmospheres are always geographical, confined to a particular place for a set period (Shaw 2014).

Atmospheres have been conceptualised by scholars from different perspectives. For example, in the literature on affect, atmospheres are considered "a kind of indeterminate affective 'excess' through which intensive space–times can be created" (Anderson, 2009, p. 80). This is connected to the body's capacity to act, get involved and connect with a place as well as the emotional and embodied elements of a spatial experience (Ticineto Clough, 2010). Indeed, Sumartojo and Pink define atmospheres as "a quality of specific configurations of sensation, temporality, movement, memory, our material and immaterial surroundings and other people, with qualities that affect how places and events feel and what they mean to people who participate in them" (2019, p. 6). The authors suggest three characteristics of atmospheres: its spatiality (how the built environment is designed for its use and experience); temporality

(duration of events and processes in everyday life); and mobility (atmospheres are felt when we move through time and space) (Sumartojo and Pink 2019).

In marketing literature, the focus is on consumption and how atmospheres are experienced by consumers but also how specific atmospheres can shape and guide consumer behaviour. Connections are made to atmospheric retail, sensory marketing or experiential marketing as well as brand experiences (Brakus et al., 2009; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Kotler, 1974). In commercial spaces, atmospheres are produced through the organization of material elements such as architecture and aesthetic style, as well as immaterial elements that enhance the consumption experience such as lighting, colours, music, smells, movement through space, and the relationship between producers and consumers.

While some atmospheres can be organic, scholars agree that most are actively assembled, staged, curated or choreographed (Bille et al. 2015; Concha, 2019; Kolehmainen and Mäkinen 2021; Koren and Hracs 2023; Montefrio and Sin 2021; Shaw 2014; Sloane, 2014; Wijngaarden and Hracs 2023). Affecting and guiding people's experiences may be done for aesthetic, artistic or utilitarian purposes, in private homes or public art galleries, for example, but much of this work is driven by commercial imperatives. Atmospheres are assembled to attract, engage and satisfy consumers whiles adding layers of value and distinction to goods, services and experiences. Importantly, while global chains including Starbucks, McDonalds and H&M aim to produce familiarity and accessibility by replicating layouts, signage and products, staging atmospheres that are perceived as unique and authentic takes more effort and imagination. Recent studies highlight how individuals working in independent fashion boutiques, record shops and book shops as well as co-working spaces and nightclubs, strategically curate a range of aesthetic, material, immaterial, cultural, symbolic and social elements to produce their desired

atmospheres (Brown, 2017; Hracs and Jansson, 2020; Koren and Hracs, 2023; Leslie et al., 2015; O'Brien, 2017; Sonnichsen, 2016; Wijngaarden and Hracs, 2023).

Yet, more research on the practices of these actors, who may be entrepreneurs, employees or intermediaries, is needed. In examining who assembles atmospheres, it is useful to look beyond those who interact directly with consumers, including retail clerks, to investigate the work performed by those who operate behind the scenes (Koren and Hracs 2023). Moreover, given the importance of context and product specificity, studies on a broader range of consumer spaces and atmospheres are needed. Indeed, even limiting the scope to food-related spaces including supermarkets, restaurants, pubs, food trucks, farmers markets, farm shops, wineries and other agritourism 'spectacles' reveals a high degree of diversity (Arthur and Hracs, 2015; Fendrychová and Jehlička, 2018; Hirth et al., 2021; Hubbard, 2019; Joosse and Hracs, 2015; Lehtokunnas and Pyyhtinen, 2022; Marovelli, 2019; Montefrio and Sin, 2021; Timan, 2021; Wessel, 2012). Looking at street food markets, which remain understudied despite their growing popularity, can shed more light on the process of staging atmospheres.

2.1 : Curation

In the marketplace for cultural products the value of good, services and experiences often rests on their symbolic rather than material properties (Hracs et al., 2013). As a result, the values of cultural products are socially embedded, constructed and constantly negotiated (Negro et al., 2010). Because it is difficult to fully understand product qualities (Callon et al., 2002) or predict consumer tastes and preferences (Caves, 2002), the marketplace also features a high degree of uncertainty (Aspers and Darr, 2011). These conditions have long necessitated the involvement of cultural intermediaries, who Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984), defined as market actors existing

in-between producers and consumers, involved in the framing, qualification and circulation of symbolic goods, services and experiences (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014). These individuals share common characteristics, including high levels of cultural capital, and positions within subcultures, scenes, industries and organizations, which contribute to and validate their legitimacy and authority (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2014). In the 1960s, when Bourdieu was writing, these professional tastemakers included the producers of cultural programmes in radio and television, advertising and marketing creatives, critics, museum curators and gallery directors. Today the range of actors operating in specific fields such as art, literature, journalism and music has expanded (Ashton and Couzins, 2015).

Curation is a distinct subfield of intermediation (Balzar 2014; Joosse and Hracs 2015; Jansson and Hracs 2018). The word 'curate' is derived from the Latin verb 'curare,' which means taking care and is traditionally associated with art and museum collections (Balzer, 2014). Over time the role of curators has shifted from preserving and archiving art to selecting, evaluating, displaying and framing pieces. Recently, the concept has been extended and applied to curators who perform a broad range of activities in other fields such as music, fashion, food and craft (Balzer, 2015; Bartmanski and Woodward, 2014; Concha, 2017; Goodman and Jaworska, 2020; Jansson and Hracs, 2018; Joosse and Hracs, 2015; Leslie et al., 2015). The focus on curatorial practices has also extended beyond objects to include services, interactions and experiences such as music streaming services, fashion shows, co-work spaces and night clubs (Brown, 2017; B. J. Hracs and Webster, 2021; Jansson, 2019; Koren and Hracs, 2023; Merkel, 2019; Wijngaarden and Hracs, 2023).

Existing studies have endeavoured to identify the range of actors who perform curation, asserting the need to look beyond the human actors originally identified by Bourdieu (1987).

Alongside individuals, communities, businesses, spaces, such as record shops and farmers markets, and socio-technical actors such as Spotify, Netflix and other streaming platforms are now considered curators (Joosse and Hracs 2015; Jansson and Hracs 2018; Hracs and Webster 2021). These studies demonstrate that traditional or professional curators, such as museum staff, magazines and cultural institutions, are being challenged and complemented by new or less formal actors (Ashton and Couzins, 2015; Barna, 2017).

Although few studies have explicitly considered why curation is performed, nascent work highlights that curators are motivated by a range of economic and non-economic imperatives (Joosse and Hracs 2015; Jansson and Hracs 2018; Koren and Hracs 2023). These include pay, profit and market share as well as exerting influence by shaping tastes, choices and consumption practices. Other curators seek to establish or reinforce their positions and value within local scenes while also enhancing their own brands and social and cultural capital.

Spatially, curation is performed in a range of physical, temporary and virtual spaces including record shops, fashion boutiques, farmers markets, social media channels and streaming platforms (Concha 2019; Goodman and Jaworska 2020; Hracs and Webster 2021; Jansson and Hracs 2018; Joosee and Hracs 2015;; Leslie et al. 2015). Importantly, the unique dynamics of such spaces not only contain but shape the nature, qualities and outcomes of curation (Jansson and Hracs 2018; Joosse and Hracs 2015; Koren and Hracs 2023).

Yet, as markets, consumption and curatorial practices continue to evolve there is an ongoing need to study curation. More work is needed on 'what' curation is and the range of curatorial practices – what they are as well as why, how and where they are performed. Acknowledging the importance of specificity, empirical studies covering a range of fields and contexts are needed. Yet, beyond exploring differences and similarities between sectors such as

art, music, fashion and food, it is important to look at curation across each sector to identify unique and universal elements. Indeed, just as record shops differ from music streaming platforms, farm shops differ from food blogs. In so doing, attention should be paid to the spaces of curation and the ways in which spatial dynamics shape and are shaped by curatorial practices. Studies of poorly understood spaces and actors such as street food markets and market organisers are needed to nuance our collective understanding of curation.

3: Methods

The findings presented in this paper are based on 9 months of ethnographic research conducted by the first author. The fieldwork included participant observation in the form of visits to 14 street food markets in London and time working directly alongside 4 traders in the stalls at 11 street food markets as well as market organisers at the EAT-LONDON[1] office and markets. In addition to countless conversations with a range of relevant respondents including traders, market organisers and on-site staff, 8 key informant interviews were conducted.

Participant observation with EAT-LONDON involved tasks in the office such as reviewing and giving feedback on their website; creating databases of offices in the areas where the markets are located; collecting quotes from the media that they could use to promote their markets; compiling news stories about their markets, their traders, and the competition to produce a weekly newsletter and creating a plan for auditing their markets and to survey their customers on site. Performing these tasks provided a good understanding of the imperatives and practices of market organisers. However, valuable insights also came from informal interviews, conversations about their work, the planning of markets, the evaluations they made of their traders and the requirements they discussed about bringing in new traders.

[1] Companies and people's names have been changed to protect anonymity.

Beyond the office, markets across London were visited at lunch time, in the evenings and during weekends. The aim was to gather information on the setting up of markets, and how the curatorial decisions made at the office were enacted by food traders and staff on site. Participant observation was conducted while performing the role of assistant to the on-site market organisers. Routine tasks included talking to and managing staff, namely cleaners, security guards, and food traders, making sure the food stalls were set up correctly and controlling the queues of customers when service started. Other tasks included promoting the markets by taking pictures and sharing them on social media.

The second stage of fieldwork involved observing the curation process on site by working with food traders at their stalls or vans in various markets and looking at the decisions and experiences of food traders and market organisers. The work involved tasks such as unloading vans and carrying boxes, setting up a gazebo, preparing ingredients, cooking food, serving plates, taking orders and chatting with customers and engaging with other traders and market organisers. The participant observation during these shifts usually lasted for five or six hours for a lunchtime market, and eight or more hours when working at a weekend night market or a festival. Photos were taken throughout the day and field notes were written up and expanded on during breaks, evenings and non-working days.

The third stage involved 8 key informant interviews (6 market organisers, 1 food blogger and 1 landowner / market developer). The aim was to discuss and clarify issues and ideas that emerged during the participant observation. Specific questions about the curatorial practices and their relationship with other actors in the field were asked.

Data analysis involved a systematic process of coding and re-coding using the software Atlas.ti 7.0. Each field note or transcript was analysed phrase by phrase, while thematic codes,

annotations and reflective notes were added. After this 'open coding,' the data was organised into categories which corresponded to the themes and questions from the interview guides, literature, annotations and reflective notes. A process of axial coding followed through which connections between and within categories and subcategories were made. At this stage, some codes and subcategories 'broke down' while others emerged as more pervasive or poignant across the sample. We then moved toward identifying preliminary theories and collapsing categories into overarching themes through an iterative process of moving back and forth between the data and the research questions, interview guides and literature.

It is important to note that a wider set of projects conducted by the second author, which examine the nature of curation, atmospheres and experiences in different cultural industries, including food, fashion and music, also informed our paper (Arthur and Hracs 2015; Jakob and Hracs 2015; Joosse and Hracs 2015; Jansson and Hracs 2018; Hracs and Jansson 2020; Hracs and Webster 2021; Koren and Hracs 2023; Wijngaarden and Hracs 2023).

4: The Case of Street Food Markets in London

Although eating on the street has long been a feature of urban life, street food markets have exploded across many cities over the past two decades (Davies and Evans 2019; Marovelli 2019). Once perceived as affordable food for the working classes, market stalls and food trucks have been transformed into a modern, hip and valuable phenomena – in part through promotion on TV shows, blogs and social media (Goodman and Jaworska, 2020; Siu, 2013). In London, countless online articles celebrate the diverse range of street food markets in the city and help consumers, be they residents or tourists, find the best options for their preferences. A recent article in TimeOut magazine profiled 29 specific spaces (Time Out London Food and Drink,

2023). By offering experiences and an alternative to imported foods and global food chains, street food markets are being used as tools of economic development, tourism, community cohesion and the revitalisation of places by attracting attention, investment and middle-class consumers (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010; Newman and Burnett, 2013; Parham, 2009; Regeneris Consulting, 2010).

In London the individual markets exhibit a range of dynamics. Aesthetically, some are old and traditional while others are new and modern. Spatially, some 'pop up' on streets, in alleys or car parks and may be outside or partially covered, while others use old buildings or new purpose-built indoor spaces. Temporally, markets may open during the day, evenings or weekends and be permanent, seasonal, monthly, weekly or daily. Moreover, some occupy public spaces and allow for the free flow of individuals while others are private, regulated and exclusionary spaces (Timan, 2021). Figures 1, 2 and 3 provide a flavour for the range of street food market spaces in London.

Figure 1: Closed market at Covent Garden (Source: Author)

Figure 2: Lunch market at Canary Wharf (Source: Author)

Figure 3: Market in Shoreditch (Source: Author)

With well over 100 street food markets in London the competition for consumer attention and spending between markets and individual traders operating within markets is intensifying. However, while many traditional markets consist of traders who work independently, despite agreeing to common practices and opening times, the markets we focus on in this paper are organised in a more wholistic manner. Here market organisers, who work for the owners of markets, full-time or freelance, function as key intermediaries who curate a range of elements to assemble affective atmospheres and stage attractive and valuable experiences. This is a new profession, but most have university degrees and experience in the food or catering industry, or event planning, marketing or public relations more broadly. Unlike other food-related curators including celebrity chefs, farmers markets, food-bag services and online influencers, who may be

motivated by shaping tastes, reducing food miles or preserving regional products, the market organisers in this study are driven by the economic imperatives of running a business (Goodman and Jaworska 2020; Joosse and Hracs 2015; Hracs and Webster 2021). Rather than supporting people with their food choices and promoting 'good' food based on value judgements related to whether food is for example local, sustainable, ethical or nutritious, market organisers aim for appropriateness. The idea is to match consumer preferences with appropriate spaces, food and traders to maximise satisfaction, spending and ultimately profits.

5.1: Appropriate Spaces

Beyond food 'on the go' (Hirth et al., 2021) or food sharing (commensality) (Davies and Evans, 2019), street food markets offer consumption experiences that involve a range of material and immaterial elements. Market organisers curate not only what food is being sold, by whom to whom, but everything from layouts, aesthetics, music, lighting, and culture to produce an attractive sense of place, vibe or atmosphere. Crucially, the market 'place' is not a mere container of economic activity but rather a key ingredient that contributes to and shapes products, brands, consumption experiences and affective atmospheres (Jansson and Hracs 2018; Joosse and Hracs 2015; Koren and Hracs 2023; Lorentzen 2009; Marovelli 2019; Shaw 2014; Timan 2021). In this section we discuss how market organisers attune their curatorial practices to space at different scales.

Although the focus of this paper is on the meso scale (market) and micro scale (individual food carts within the market), it is useful to briefly start with the macro scale (location of the market within the city). Indeed, market organisers evaluate a range of options before 'placing' their market in a particular neighbourhood. A range of practical, economic and psychological

aspects are considered including the area's charisma, accessibility, proximity to clusters of other relevant activities, local council regulations, such as noise by-laws, the demographics and attitudes of local communities and the local and migratory consumer base (Koren and Hracs 2023). Finding unique settings, such as former factories or petrol stations, which add aesthetic elements such as brick walls, wood floors and exposed pipes as well as heritage elements including narrative histories about the former uses, is also part of the process (Timan, 2021; Wijngaarden and Hracs 2023). As Alan explained:

> "Most places feel purpose built for what they're doing [but] these buildings that we occupy, they are places that you can't go most of the time, it's a new environment. You really get to explore empty warehouses, that kind of thing. There's a feeling that you're in a forgotten place, it's kind of cool, it's exciting, you're exploring the hidden archaeology of the city" (Market Organiser: Vibes Feast).

At the meso scale, of the actual market, our findings suggest that organisers plan their spaces according to a 'hierarchy of needs' model. Once basic requirements such as water, power and wi-fi infrastructure, square footage and accessibility are ensured market organisers plan the layout and overall aesthetic. Much like with book shops, fashion boutiques and record shops selecting which content to include in a space and how to physically arrange and display that content is a key curatorial practice for market organisers (Jansson and Hracs 2018; Leslie et al 2015; O'Brien 2017). Within food markets, like EAT-LONDON which had to fit 28 traders on site, each individual food cart is located strategically in relation to entrances, seating areas and other carts. Traders are distributed across the market to avoid competition, between two vegetarian or burger stalls for example, while also enhancing a sense of variety and discovery. For example, what do consumers encounter when they first arrive? Layouts are also designed to

enhance flows within the market. For example, popular traders who usually have longer queues might need more space for customers to gather around.

Market organisers must also 'match' the affective atmospheres of the market with the preferences and expectations of consumer groups. Is this a daytime market for office workers or an edgy night-time market for young hipsters? The spaces need to be sufficiently appealing, fun and interesting to attract and satisfy their target consumers. Interestingly, rather developing empty spaces, organisers prefer to work with pre-existing materials and character (Wijngaarden and Hracs 2023). In Vibes Feast, for example, existing features such as exposed pipes, old phone units, sea containers and graffiti were fused with new features. New roofs, bars and decorations were installed and in the middle of the market oil drums with fires were placed. Other new features included light bulbs, a disco ball, wooden chairs and tables, and signs painted on the walls. Micro spaces within the market were also created such as hidden corners and seating areas and bars with different themes or styles and decorations.

Attention was also paid to immaterial or sensorial elements such as sound (music or silence), light (colour, intensity, using candles) and smells and fumes (from the food). Organisers place speakers in different areas and curate the music, through DJs or playlists. The heating was also controlled depending on the weather and nature of the space (open or closed). Oil drums with fires and other improvised heating are used and consumers usually gather around them to chat.

Thus, market organisers also engineered the socializing elements of their affective atmospheres. The customized micro-areas, including rum bars and wine bars, within the market are used as separate spaces where people can either share with strangers or sit as couples or groups (Davies and Evans 2019; Marovelli 2019). Beyond the food, these misco-spaces and the

atmosphere of discovery encourage longer and repeat visits to the market. However, consumers are not totally free to explore and use the spaces as they like. Indeed, organisers seek to educate and condition consumers on the 'correct' use of space by hanging signs containing rules about behaviour and how to share tables or seating areas (Concha, 2019; Santaoja and Jallinoja, 2021). As in pop-up retailing (Warnaby and Shi, 2018), the aim is to achieve 'design coherence' across the different elements while creating an environment that is functional for the traders and engaging for consumers (Concha, 2019; Surchi 2011).

This coherence extends to the micro scale and the carts or stalls within the market. Each individual food unit needs to align with the overall atmosphere and brand experience of the market (Wessel 2012). Organisers evaluate and select traders not only for their food and performance but their aesthetics including individual branding, colours, logos, light fixtures, counter organization and uniforms. The units need to be fun, unique, and attractive but also consistently clean and organised.

Overall, market organisers curate a range of spatial dynamics to produce unique and attractive atmospheres. As Perla, EAT-LONDON founder, argues: "[We are] 'value creators'. 'Custom-made' bespoke 'place-making' is what we do best…". Despite the careful curation of a range of elements across different spatial scales, however, the markets cannot appear or feel 'staged'. Rather, they must come across as organic or simply thrown together because authenticity and value is quickly depleted by 'trying too hard' (Bille et al., 2015; Michael, 2015).

5.2: Appropriate Food

Curators in the food-related marketplace, including farmers markets, food bag services, celebrity chefs and social media influencers have a range of motivations, from promoting sustainable food

consumption practices to maximising profits (Goodman and Jaworska 2020; Jansson and Hracs 2018; Joosse and Hracs 2015). Based on these motivations, as well as individual positionalities, roles and tastes, many curators try to educate consumers about so-called 'good food' and encourage specific practices such as veganism (Goodman and Jaworska 2020; Joosse and Hracs 2015). Importantly, the concept of good food is highly contested with scholars identifying a range of 'qualities' (Callon et al. 2002) including 'local,' 'organic,' 'ethical', among others, that may matter depending on individual value judgments and interpretations (Clarke et al., 2008; Connell et al., 2008; Guthman, 2008; Halkier, 2010; Joosse and Hracs, 2015). By contrast, organisers of street food markets, who are motivated by the economic considerations of running a profitable and sustainable business, endeavour to provide appropriate food. Here food-related qualities are identified, evaluated and selected not because they are good or bad but because they match consumer preferences and the practicalities of the market setting described in the previous section. For example, the food needs to be attractive (flavour and look), authentic, affordable (matching consumer spending habits), practical (easy to eat on the street) and consistent (same quality every time). Ultimately, the food sold in the market is curated to enhance the attractiveness and value of the consumption experience and to generate distinction from competing alternatives, such as retail chains and other street food markets.

Although, street food has traditionally been labelled cheap and greasy, market organisers work to change this perception (Hirth et al. 2021; Marovelli 2019; Wessel 2012). They address elements like hygiene, cleanliness and ethical sourcing (especially meat). These choices relate to a 'morality of quality' and the growing importance of ethical and environmental issues for street food market consumers (Cronin, 2004). Market organisers describe looking for clear and appropriate traceability and sustainability of the food. But taste is also an essential consideration.

Quality flavour results in a satisfying meal and return visits so even if other elements of appropriate food are met, curators will not include food that is not tasty and visually appealing in their markets. Organisers told us that the food must be of a high standard and that they personally taste everything before admitting a new trader to their markets.

Uniqueness is also important. Organisers include traders who offer original products that are different from dishes that consumers might find in chain restaurants. Uniqueness can be produced by combining ingredients, seasoning or display. The opening vignette described how creative fillings were changing vegetarian street food. More broadly, market organisers talked about moving beyond food that is simply 'stuck in a bun'.

Additional layers of value can also be added by combining other elements such as authenticity (Jansson and Hracs 2020; Montefrio and Sin 2021). For Jones et al. (2005) authenticity can mean the perpetuation of tradition or an original and distinctive product or approach. Authenticity is not inherent to an object or person but rather a claim, a narrative that is accepted (Jones et al., 2005). Authenticity, and thus distinction and value, can be produced through spatial associations (where something is from or made) or production processes and techniques (how something is made) (Arthur and Hracs, 2015; Pike, 2013, 2015).

Marcy, a trader who sells Malaysian burgers, provides an example of combining originality with authenticity. She positions her business as creative and authentic based on her ethnic background. Marcy was born in Malaysia and lived there for ten years before moving with her family to the UK. She used her knowledge about Malay cuisine to develop her business idea and create "KL burgers". Marcy replicates and enhances her mother's recipes, cooking techniques and seasoning knowledge to produce a new version of Malaysian food. Marcy also does research and development trips to Malaysia to try new preparations and to bring in creative ideas for her

business. Her signature menu features Malaysian burgers, which use the burger format but with traditional Malaysian preparations as fillings. For example, she transformed the chicken satay[2] recipe into chicken patties. She uses halal meat to cater to Malaysian Muslims and uses the same seasoning, homemade peanut sauce and sambal chili sauce from her mother's recipes. When interacting with customers Marcy speaks Malay and discusses the food's origin (Pike, 2015). Thus, the attractiveness, uniqueness and authenticity of the food stems from combining material and immaterial elements and effective value-creation strategies such as place-branding, providing education and inspiration and 'playing up' cultural narratives and traditional or artisanal methods of preparation (Arthur and Hracs 2015; Joosse and Hracs 2015; Hubbard 2017; Montefrio and Sin 2021; Pike 2015; Wijngaarden and Hracs 2023). To run a successful street food market, organisers must identify, evaluate and select a range of similarly creative and savvy traders and food offerings. They must also constantly work with existing traders to develop and refresh their menus, while bringing in new traders, to keep the market dynamic and exciting for repeat or even 'regular' consumers (Hracs and Jansson 2020).

Market organisers must also ensure that a range of functional requirements are met. The food must be safe, consistent, quick to produce and relatively affordable. They also curate portion size and display to ensure that the food is easy to eat (no utensils) and conducive for sharing and tasting. The aim is to enhance the social aspects of food consumption while encouraging consumers to taste and try a range of different items to keep people in the market longer and purchasing more portions (Davies and Evans 2019; Marovelli 2019; Timan, 2021). As Alan explains:

[2] A Southeast Asian dish of seasoned, skewered and grilled meat served with a spicy peanut sauce.

> It's not just about the food, it's a form of entertainment. It's sharing a lot of different small portions of things. That's why we're trying to move people away from burgers and into sliders to share. You can eat more…instead of having [trader's name A] rib roll and being full you can have four or five things and maybe share one or two things with your friends (Market Organiser: Vibes Feast).

The practical considerations also extend to the reduction of waste by aligning supply levels with consumer traffic in the market. Yet, this is driven by minimising monetary losses more than sustainability. As with supermarkets, market organisers curate aspects of food supply and waste (Lehtokunnas and Pyyhtinen, 2022).

This section demonstrates that curators must ensure that the food is appropriate for the dynamics of the market. Fundamentally, the food must be tasty and visually appealing to attract and satisfy consumers but the value of the food and overall experience can be enhanced by layering additional elements such as novelty, authenticity, traceability, shareability and spatial and cultural associations.

5.3: Appropriate People

Affective atmospheres consist of spaces, objects, bodies and practices (Anderson 2009; Marovelli 2019; Montefrio and Sin 2021 Shaw 2014). While appropriate spaces and food are central to street food markets, three groups of people co-produce and co-promote the experience through their presence and practices (Hracs et al. 2013; Kolehmainen and Mäkinen 2021; Shaw 2014; Timan 2021). This section demonstrates how market organisers curate the traders, support staff and consumers within their markets to assemble affective atmospheres and add value and distinction.

With respect to traders, the Vibes Feast's website lists a set of characteristics which market organisers are looking for. Beyond 'quality food' that is cooked with 'character' and 'originality' as well as 'consistency', the list includes 'professionalism' and 'magic' which entails delivering food to customers with 'energy and charisma.' The importance of 'magic' reflects wider literature on aesthetic labour, affective labour and the role that retail workers play in creating valuable consumption experiences (Hracs and Jansson, 2020; Kolehmainen and Mäkinen, 2021; Leslie et al., 2015; Pettinger, 2004). Employers cultivate and exploit the embodied capacities and attributes of their workers while expecting them to connect with consumers through their personalities, emotions and bodily performances (Hracs and Leslie, 2014; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007; Williams and Connell, 2010).

Market organisers identify and evaluate these attributes in potential traders before including them. Typically, selected traders are young entrepreneurs who not only make great food but 'look good and sound right' (Karlsson, 2012; Williams and Connell, 2010) by performing aesthetic labour through their personality, clothes, interactions and performances about the inspiration, preparation, and cultural significance of the food. The selection process is not meritocratic or unbiased. William, a food blogger who was an expert in London's street food scene, comments that the bigger companies tend to pursue traders within their social networks and tend to create a closed community that is "almost impossible to penetrate" by outsiders. For example, we were told that targeted and accepted traders are usually young, white, male, well-educated, well-off with 'posh accents' to match. Or as Alan put it: "we have a policy that we don't work with anyone that we don't like, and who's not like us, and they have to have the same kind of mentality". While this approach clearly produces and perpetuates inequality and exclusion it is common for economically driven businesses, including global clothing retailers, to

hire based on ‘fit’ with the commercial strategies of the brand (Concha, 2019; Koren and Hracs 2023; Warhurst and Nixon, 2007; Williams and Connell 2010).

Much like other entrepreneurs, including musicians, fashion designers and online influencers, who add value through storytelling and personal branding, the trader’s personal narratives are a source of value (Arthur and Hracs, 2015; Brydges and Hracs, 2018; Duffy, 2016; Wijngaarden and Hracs, 2023). Alan from Vibes Feast explains that when curating their markets, they seek to include an interesting selection of not only food and traders but stories behind the food and traders (Wijngaarden and Hracs 2023). Indeed, the story behind their path to becoming a trader as well as the inspiration for the food, the sourcing of the ingredients, the preparation and their passion are all important features of an appropriate trader. Market organisers evaluate how well a trader’s narrative is communicated clearly to consumers in person and online through websites and social media channels (Brydges and Hracs 2018). Website sections and social media posts often document the food preparation at home and at the market using personal stories and photos of the process and finished dishes. Performing this form of aesthetic labour online is demanding but sharing these stories educates the consumers, who gain a deeper understanding about the food they experience (Arthur and Hracs, 2015; Hracs and Leslie 2014). The practice also helps consumers to enhance their food-related cultural capital while building a connection and trust with the trader and market (Joosse and Hracs 2015).

Market organisers also ensure that the narrative and aesthetic features of a trader’s brand match their expectations and those of consumers at the market. Alice, a market organiser, emphasises the importance of a trader’s ‘look’ which needs to have an ‘edge’ or something attractive. Indeed, in the scene, there is a valorisation of cultural forms which reject or provide an alternative to the mainstream in the form of chain restaurants and mass-produced food. Street

food markets are not meant to be too polished, corporate or boring, despite all the strategic organisation behind the scenes, but rather effortlessly unique, original, edgy, fresh, different, creative and exciting (Brydges et al., 2020; Michael, 2015). However, other market organisers including Rosie prioritise the notion of care which intersects with food sustainability and issues related to cleanliness, quality, health and safety. Traders are encouraged to highlight the importance of handmade, homemade or so-called artisan products. They also highlight the sustainable or organic sourcing of their ingredients, the reliability of providers, as well as freshness and seasonality. Importantly, they need to make sure they invest appropriate amounts of manual work in crafting their food because this investment adds value and partially justifies higher food prices for consumers. As Alice explains:

> "…to make your own pulled pork is going to take you about 12 hours… and then you have your artisan buns, your sauces that you've made, your little bits that are going on top… you're preparing normally for 2 days before…it's actually a huge amount of work" (Market Organiser)

Ultimately, market organisers configure their collectives by selecting traders who can deliver appropriate food and appropriate performances. They must embody and display a range of desirable characteristics during the interactive service encounter, such as being charismatic and fun. They must also make customers feel welcome so that they spend more time at the market. The performance requires not only the ability to engage consumers but also to deliver orders quickly and consistently for intense service periods that last between two and three hours.

In addition to food traders, market organisers curate a range of support staff who contribute to the smooth running of the market and the affective atmosphere. Roles include general managers, hostesses at the entrances, on-site managers, bar managers and bar staff,

photographers, PR staff, DJ's and performers as well as cleaning and security staff. Importantly, while some team members are visible by their uniforms and positions such as DJs on platforms or security staff at front entrances, most move around the market rapidly to perform their work without identification in a hidden manner. They mix in with consumers and traders to help create and maintain an enjoyable atmosphere (Kolehmainen and Mäkinen 2021). Once again, although the experience is meticulously planned it is meant to feel organic and effortless (Brydges et al. 2020; Koren and Hracs 2023). Cleaners are particularly invisible even as they constantly circulate to manage and contain the flows of material produced from the atmosphere, clearing tables, emptying bins and repositioning seats (Shaw 2014; Timan 2021).

Finally, the presence of consumers is essential to generating revenue but also co-producing and co-promoting the market experience (Hracs et al. 2013). Much like nightclubs, market organisers curate appropriate audiences depending on the qualities of each market location (Koren and Hracs 2023; Moor, 2013). They identify and interpret consumer tastes, preferences and needs based on their personal experience and knowledge of the scene (Concha 2019). For example, while local office workers are most suitable for lunch time markets, families are ideal for weekend markets and young hipsters frequent night markets. Once again, market organisers work to match the food offering and atmosphere to what different groups want and expect: a quick but tasty lunch; a seating area and healthy food; or Dj's and bars. Nick equates his consumers with music enthusiasts:

> "[for market consumers] the freshness, excitement and wanting to try the new big thing is a bit like listening to the new band before anyone else. People really get excited by the new traders." (Market Organiser: EAT-LONDON)

With cheaper food options always available in large cities, street food market consumers also share a willingness to invest more time and money in their food-related consumption experiences (Arthur and Hracs 2015; Joosse and Hracs 2015). This desire may be driven by range of personal motivations including performing distinction, communicating class status, enhancing and displaying cultural capital or obtaining food-related inspiration and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1984; Hracs et al., 2013; Hubbard, 2017; Joosse and Hracs, 2015; Simmel, 1904; Veblen, 1899). Indeed, food practices are not just about eating and nutrition but forming a community through a recognised experience of sociality and connections with like-minded people (Hubbard 2017; Joosse and Hracs, 2015). Importantly, although real-time commensality occurs in the physical space of the market, by sitting, eating and socialising with other consumers, interactions also occur in virtual spaces through social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok (Brydges et al. 2020; Davies and Evans 2019). Consumers post photos, videos and comments about the dishes they are trying as well as, feelings, atmospheric elements and the broader market experience (Goodman and Jaworska 2020; Kolehmainen and Mäkinen 2021). Through social media and word of mouth, consumers generate 'buzz' and help to co-promote the market and attract more consumers (Brydges et al., 2020; Hracs et al., 2013; Warnaby and Shi, 2018). In the moment, their presence helps to co-produce the attractiveness and value of the experience – especially as 'cool' people want to be around other 'cool' people (Brydges et al. 2020; Michael 2015). But posts and comments of consumers also co-produce the market and value over time as they are used as valuable feedback by market organisers. Positive reactions, suggestions and critiques are analysed to learn more about the characteristics and preferences of their 'audiences' and to tweak, enhance or refresh various aspects of the market. As Adam explained: "we always have discussions [with

consumers] at the end of the weekend… What did you eat? Was it any good? Does anyone [traders] need coaching?"

Therefore, bodies are not passive or merely 'caught' in atmospheres (Kolehmainen and Mäkinen 2021). Rather, through their actions and practices, whether intentional, noticed or rewarded, traders, support staff and consumers play important roles in producing, promoting and maintaining street food markets and market organisers strategically curate, enrol, direct and leverage these appropriate people.

6: Conclusion

Acknowledging that street food markets offer unique atmospheres consisting of objects, bodies and spaces that are actively assembled, rather than naturally occurring, this paper explored the curatorial practices being performed behind the scenes. Drawing on 9 months of ethnographic fieldwork, involving participant observation and interviews, it provided a case study of street food market organisers in London. The paper demonstrated that these poorly understood actors attune their curatorial practices to consumer preferences and commercial imperatives. The three empirical sections outlined the ways in which these curators produce attractive atmospheres and valuable consumption experiences by combining appropriate 1) spaces, 2) food and 3) people.

The paper showed that market organisers negotiate a range of practical, economic and psychological aspects before 'placing' their markets in particular neighbourhoods. The importance of finding unique settings such as former factories or petrol stations because of their aesthetic qualities was also highlighted. Within market spaces, organisers ensure basic infrastructure and plan layouts and aesthetics. As in book shops, fashion boutiques and record shops, content, in the form of food traders, is arranged and displayed to produce a sense of

discovery and to avoid competition. Importantly, market organisers match the affective atmospheres of the market with the preferences and expectations of different consumer groups, such as office workers or hipsters, combining appropriate immaterial or sensorial elements while engineering micro-spaces and social interactions. Practising 'design coherence,' market organisers also ensure that each food unit aligns with and contributes to the atmosphere and brand experience of the market.

With respect to food, the paper asserted that appropriateness consists of elements including attractiveness (flavour and look), authenticity, affordability, functionality and consistency. Uniqueness and value are generated by combining material and immaterial elements and effective value-creation strategies such place-branding, providing education and inspiration and 'playing up' cultural narratives and traditional or artisanal methods of preparation.

Finally, the paper demonstrated that bodies are not merely caught in atmospheres but active participants who co-produce and co-promote market experiences. Market organisers curate three groups of people – traders, support staff and consumers aiming for appropriateness based on identities, aesthetics, performances and interactions. For example, food traders need to be caring and charismatic, cleaning staff need to be silent and stealthy and consumers need to be curious and cool.

The findings contribute to our understanding of the processes and spatial dynamics of curation, atmospheres, experiences and value creation. Market organisers were introduced as poorly understood curators who work behind the scenes. Beyond 'how' they assemble attractive atmospheres and valuable experiences, we learn 'why' they perform curation, gaining insight into the influence of commercial motivations on curatorial aims and practices. Spatially, the novel case of street food markets nuances our understanding of 'where' curation is performed

while contributing to nascent studies which examine the ways in which spaces not only contain but shape the nature, qualities and outcomes of curation.

While this paper focussed on the stage of creating atmospheres and value through curation, future research could examine processes which threaten to erode the value and uniqueness of street food market experiences over time and how market organisers counter these threats to sustain or renew value. Part of this research could involve examining the trans-local connections between street food markets around the world and the extent to which commercial strategies, atmospheric elements and curatorial practices flow across space through different physical, temporary and virtual channels. For example, are curators monitoring and borrowing knowledge from other markets and does this result in greater uniqueness or uniformity? More attention could also be paid to how consumers value and experience street food markets and their enrolment in processes of co-production and co-promotion.

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