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Deep-frying the nation: Communicating about Scottish food and nutrition

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, the UK media and popular culture have associated the Scottish diet with unhealthy, deep-fried foods, notably the notorious deep-fried Mars bar. The Carron Fish Bar in Stonehaven, near Aberdeen, claims to have invented the deep-fried Mars bar in the 1990s (Dow, 1995). A light-hearted survey of Scottish fish and chip shops by Glasgow public health researchers, published in the Christmas 2004 edition of the *Lancet*, found that twenty-two per cent of Scottish chip shops currently sold deep-fried Mars bars, and seventeen per cent had done so in the past (Morrison and Petticrew, 2004). The deep-fried Mars bar is now widely available in tourist areas such as Edinburgh's Royal Mile, although publicity from journalists and travel writers (e.g. Rough Guides, 2015) has no doubt increased demand, and thus availability. Although anecdotal evidence suggests that Mars bars were deep-fried in several countries apart from Scotland before they first appeared in Stonehaven, my focus in this paper is not the origins of the deep-fried Mars bar as an actual food, but rather its origins and use as a cultural symbol and stereotype.

The *Daily Record* first reported the deep-fried Mars bar in 1995 (Dow, 1995), and the story 'went viral' in the British media (e.g. Arlidge, 1995; Low, 1995). Since then there has been an on-going trail in the UK press about the deep-fried Mars bar, to the point where it seems virtually inevitable that any media report about the Scottish diet will include a reference to it, sometimes alongside references to other notorious deep-fried Scottish foods, such as deep-fried haggis and deep-fried pizza. Further examples of media coverage will be discussed in the second half of this paper, but to illustrate this, a recent report in the *Daily Mail* online about a study on beliefs about fruit and vegetables in Scotland provides an ideal opportunity for the journalist to make reference to the deep-fried Mars bar, describing Scotland as '[t]he nation that gave the world such culinary obscenities as the deep-fried Mars Bar and the pizza fritter' ('A Fifth of Scottish People', 2013).

In this paper I consider how and why the deep-fried Mars bar has become the icon for the Scottish diet over the last twenty years, the implications of depicting the Scottish diet in these terms and alternative narratives that have emerged in opposition. To begin, I review the history of stereotyping of the Scottish diet over the last several centuries, suggesting that far from being a novel phenomenon, the deep-fried Mars bar is the latest in a line of stereotypes of the Scottish diet that have emerged during

periods when the relationship between Scotland and England has been changing and uneasy. Drawing on interdisciplinary food scholarship about 'food slurs' and the cultural representation of fat, I then consider why the Scottish diet stereotype has taken this particular form since the mid-1990s. Finally, I discuss two key modes in which journalists and others use the deep-fried Mars bar to communicate messages about Scottish culinary culture, diet and health, and the Scottish nation more broadly. Namely:

1. Journalists introduce the deep-fried Mars bar into news and feature articles about Scottish public health as a symbol of the poor Scottish diet, simultaneously communicating derogatory messages about taste, class, morality and the Scottish nation.
2. Scottish journalists and food industry representatives have increasingly contested this pattern in an effort to break a vicious cycle which negatively affects eating habits in Scotland, as well as the image of Scottish food products and culture.

Thus I will examine how a specific food – the deep-fried Mars bar – is deployed and redeployed by different people to communicate varied messages about Scotland, its diet and cuisine.

While the deep-fried Mars bar is undeniably comic, it is important to note that the deep-fried stereotype of the Scottish diet has become part of a vicious circle with real, negative effects on eating habits, and therefore health. Previous qualitative research has shown that this stereotype has shifted at least some people's beliefs about nutrition and dietary norms in an unhealthy direction: participants reported the belief that their diet is healthy and does not require attention provided they are not eating deep-fried foods on a regular basis (Fuller, Backett-Milburn and Hopton, 2003, p. 1045S). Separate research with young people from minority ethnic groups shows that the stereotype can encourage deep-fried food consumption as a way of 'claiming' Scottish identity (Hopkins, 2004, p. 265). Thus a critical examination of the deep-fried Mars bar stereotype is not only about contesting negative perceptions of Scottish food, culture and people, but also intervening in a vicious circle of representation to improve diet and health.

Analysis of mass media communication about food, diet, weight and health is a significant body of research in sociology, media and cultural studies, as well as psychology. (Recent UK studies include: Cooper et al., 2011; Gough, 2007; Hilton, Patterson and Teyhan, 2012; Hollows and Jones, 2010; Inthorn and Boyce, 2010; Ries, Rachul and Caulfield, 2011; Riesch and Spiegelhalter, 2011; Warin, 2011.) There is also an enormous body of academic research about the symbolic messages food carries, notably in anthropology (Mintz and Du Bois, 2002), as well as across the humanities and social sciences; indeed, this could be said to be the unifying concern of food scholars. This paper aims to contribute to these

literatures via detailed empirical analysis on a topic of social, cultural and political importance in the contemporary UK. I examine communication about the deep-fried Mars bar to make new points about how food is used in the public sphere to negotiate the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK, and build Scottish national identity – highly contemporary issues given the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. This is the first research project to examine the popular association of deep-fried foods with Scotland. It builds on food and folklore scholar Joy Fraser's research about stereotyping of the Scottish people and nation through images of food in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, notably in relation to haggis (Fraser, 2011). Thus this paper illuminates contemporary UK patterns of communication about Scotland through food, as well as the historical weight that these bear.

Historical Stereotyping of the Scottish Diet

In his famous *Dictionary* (1755), Dr Johnson notoriously defined oats as '[a] grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people' (n.p.). However, Dr Johnson's quip is only one example of pervasive derogatory stereotypes of the Scottish diet that circulated during the eighteenth century, in particular. Writing about the history of the cultural symbolism of haggis in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, Fraser shows that haggis came to be associated specifically with Scotland by the middle of the eighteenth century, even though people continued to eat haggis elsewhere in the UK throughout the nineteenth century (2011, pp. 22-23). Fraser bases her argument on analysis of a range of English publications from this period, including cookbooks, satirical poems and cartoons and political tracts. These documents use haggis as a pejorative symbol of Scottishness, and as a way to communicate broader stereotypes of the Scots that were emerging at the time, especially the stereotype of the so-called 'beggarly Scot' said to be poor, dirty, and diseased. As Fraser writes, '[i]n the English context [haggis was just one of] a range of culinary stereotypes and metaphors that were used to stigmatise and satirise the Scots' (p. 13).

A further example of historical 'food slurs' against the Scots is the following recognizably contemporary urban myth about food contamination. Written around 1760 by an anonymous author, who purports to be an Englishman reporting on a journey around Scotland, it describes the disgusting food practices that he supposedly witnessed north of the border:

> when I asked for Bread, some *Baunock was given to me, which the* slattern Landlady, and as nasty as Filth could make her, told me was excellent in its Kind, and that they were baking more in the next Room. Hunger having compelled me to eat a Little, which I took Care to frequently moisten with my Rum and Water; then Curiosity egged me, to have a Peep through a Hole in the

> Partition, to view their Manner of baking. The Object that presented itself to me, was the Landlady wiping with her Hand, the scabby Arse of a young Child, covered with Squitter [diarrhoea]*, which, to save her Laziness the Trouble of getting a Cloth to* wipe her own Hand with, she dabbed into the Dough. This is a new Kind of *Scotch Yeast, discovered for the Art of baking, unknown to us of the* South. I laid down my Money to pay for what I had, ran out of the House, and have since almost puked my Guts out. (English, c. 1760, pp.56-57, quoted in Fraser, 2011, p.106)

Drawing on Fraser's work by way of historical foundation to my own research on the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, I suggest that in order to understand current stereotypes of the Scottish diet we need to understand this history, as well as the broader context of Scottish political history and the relationship between Scotland and England. Fraser points out that the 'marketability [of satirical fictions about Scotland] increased whenever the relationship between the two nations was at its most turbulent' (p. 33), for example around the Act of Union in 1707, the Jacobite Rising in the 1740s and the appointment of Lord Bute as Britain's first Scottish-born Prime Minister in 1762. This may partly explain why the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have seen stereotypes of the Scottish diet (re-)emerge so strongly: since the mid-1990s the political relationship between Scotland and England has been changing in ways certainly not entirely easy, with the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and recent referendum on Scottish independence. While it is inherently difficult to prove a link between devolution and the independence movement, and recent stereotypes of the Scottish diet – at least without the benefit of historical hindsight – there are clear and suggestive historical parallels.

Deep-Fried Foods and Fat in the Contemporary Era

Setting aside the political timing, there remains the question of the deep-fried Mars bar itself: why have deep-fried foods, and the deep-fried Mars bar in particular, replaced haggis in political cartoons and satires about Scotland? The deep-fried Mars bar was certainly in the right place at the right time, but it was also an ideal candidate to be picked up as a national food slur against Scotland in the late twentieth century. As the passage I cited above from *John English's Travels through Scotland* (c. 1760) may suggest, this is partly due to the 'yuck factor' associated with the deep-fried Mars bar and other deep-fried foods. Rozin and Fallon's work (1987) suggests that our disgust response to certain foods may relate to their resemblance to bodily fluids and body parts, especially faeces, pus, vomit and genitalia. The deep-fried Mars bar combines visual and textural similarities to all of these elements in a single package, with partially melted chocolate, oozy caramel, pale lumpy batter and a phallic profile. Such

resemblance to the taboo and the abject (in the Kristevan sense) goes some way to explaining why the deep-fried Mars bar is so often interpreted and represented as grotesque or obscene. These associations, and their deployment in the UK media, are perhaps best illustrated by the ironic use of the phrase 'deep-fried Mars bar supper' (a deep-fried Mars bar with chips) as a metaphor for anal rape by political sketch-writer Simon Hoggart in the *Guardian*: '"let's gie 'im a Mars Bar supper" may be some terrible Scottish slang expression meaning male rape' (Hoggart, 1999).

However, to understand fully why the deep-fried Mars bar can be considered 'obscene', and why (two centuries on) it has replaced haggis as the ultimate Scottish diet stereotype, we also need to consider changing ideas about nutrition and fat in the contemporary period, including the specific significance of deep-fried foods. While it can now seem common sense that fat, and saturated fat in particular, are unhealthy and 'bad', historically this idea is quite recent, emerging in the 1960s. Deborah Lupton summarizes the shift in attitudes during the twentieth century:

> Animal fat, which was once considered a valued component of food (and indeed earlier this century was often eaten as 'dripping' spread on bread), is now almost uniformly represented in medical and popular discourses as an evil substance [...] People routinely describe fat or fatty foods as 'unhealthy', particularly if the fat is visible, either in its solidified form, or as a greasy or oily residue. (Lupton, 1996, p. 82)

Although Lupton specifically refers to animal fat, similar arguments can be made about the fats used in deep-frying. Nutritionally, deep-fried foods today are considered unhealthy junk foods and therefore 'bad', so that eating them attracts moral (and class) judgement (Everett, 2009; McPhail, Chapman and Beagan, 2011, p. 302). The deep-fried Mars bar can seem especially 'obscene' because it takes something that is already a junk food (a Mars bar), and literally adds an extra layer of unhealthiness or 'wrongness' by battering and deep-frying it. Moreover, deep-fried foods in Britain are closely tied to the fish and chip shop, which has been associated since it first emerged in the late nineteenth century with the working classes and the industrial north (Walton, 1992). Until well into the twentieth century chip shops were considered places that respectable people, women in particular, did not go (Walton, 1992) – and some of this class stigma continues to attach to their products today.

As with fat in food, it can seem common sense today that overweight and obesity are unhealthy and 'bad', but understanding that these concerns are culturally specific and relatively recent is also part of the jigsaw in understanding where the deep-fried Mars bar stereotype has come from and why it has any purchase on the public imagination. It is no coincidence that it is since the early-to-mid 1990s that obesity has attracted increasing public health concern and media attention, initially in the United States

but within a very short time around the world (Boero, 2007; Coveney, 2006, pp.143-144; Herndon, 2005). In recent OECD figures, Scotland ranked sixth in the world for obesity (Castle, 2015, pp. 19-20); notably, the nation also faces one of the world's highest rates of heart disease. Arguably, until the UK media and public began to associate Scotland with having a particular problem with obesity and heart disease, the stereotype of the deep-fried Mars bar could never have taken root. To illustrate this rather starkly, we are now used to seeing stereotypes of the Scottish body such as the character Fat Bastard in Mike Myers's series of *Austin Powers* films (*Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*, 1999; *Austin Powers in Goldmember*, 2002), but 250 years ago the visual stereotype of the Scottish body was one of emaciation and famine (Churchill, 1763, cited in Fraser, 2011, pp. 46-47). Thus while stereotyping of Scottish bodies and Scottish food have been constant themes in the relationship between England and Scotland since the eighteenth century, the form those stereotypes have taken has depended on historical context, including changing ideas about fat in food and on a person's body.

Media Narratives

In the second half of this paper I examine how the deep-fried Mars bar is deployed by different writers and spokespeople in the press to communicate two competing messages about Scotland and its food. As I indicated in the introduction, the two narratives I will focus on are:

1. the use of the deep-fried Mars bar as a shorthand or symbol for poor Scottish nutrition, health and obesity rates, simultaneously communicating derogatory messages about taste, class, morality and the Scottish nation itself; and
2. a competing narrative which I call 'gastronomic Scotland', emerging over the last fifteen years in part as an explicit response to the deep-fried Mars bar stereotype, which focuses on high-quality Scottish produce, chefs and restaurants.

My research is based on analysis of articles from UK and Scottish newspapers between 1995 and 2014. Newspapers referred to here are the two national Scottish broadsheets, the *Herald* (Glasgow) and the *Scotsman*, in order to focus on the conversation in the Scottish public sphere. In this conversation, Scottish national identity and cultural and economic aspiration (as well as, implicitly, political aspiration) coalesce around the issue of Scotland's food – or alternatively, we might say that food is used to communicate Scottish national identity and aspiration. One side of this conversation emphasizes Scotland's well-publicized public health problems, while the other highlights its increasingly successful food and drink sector. Throughout, the deep-fried Mars bar resurfaces again and again as the emblem of Scotland's notoriously poor diet, and the stereotype against which the Scottish food industry must

battle. Indeed, the deep-fried Mars bar trope functions as a kind of 'return of the repressed' in aspirational economic and cultural narratives about Scottish food.

The Deep-Fried Mars Bar, Scottish Health and Nutrition

I begin with several examples of newspaper articles from the mid- and late 1990s in which overweight and disease in Scotland are blamed directly on alleged national consumption of the deep-fried Mars bar, as well as metonymic fried or high-fat foods. For example, a report about people in Scotland choosing plastic surgery to address overweight and obesity opens with the claim that '[a] penchant for deep-fried Mars bars and living off the fat of the land means that seven out of ten Scotsmen are overweight' (Jourdan, 1997, p. 17). Likewise, a report highlighting that a high-fat diet increases skin cancer risk begins with the claim that 'Scots' love of chips, pies and deep-fried Mars Bars is behind the country's skin cancer epidemic' (O'Donnell, 1998, p. 22). These examples are both from the *Scotsman*, but similarly, in the *Sunday Herald*, a report about workplace food links the deep-fried Mars bar, workplace catering and poor Scottish health outcomes: 'Here in the land of the deep fried Mars bar, workplace food is not something we do well. […] We have higher blood pressure, more strokes, and higher cancer rates than almost everywhere, but what we really excel at is heart disease' (Bradshaw, 1999, p. 20).

This claim is less direct than the two previous examples: the suggestion does not seem to be that workplace canteens actually serve deep-fried Mars bars. Rather, the deep-fried Mars bar is used here (as it frequently is) as an emblem or shorthand for an unhealthy national diet, the implication being that this causes cardiovascular disease and cancer. Although the London-based UK press certainly make these kinds of statements too, I highlight examples from the Scottish press to show that this is not by any means simply a stereotype imposed on Scotland from outside, but also a powerful instance of national self-flagellation. Although similar patterns continue into the new millennium, this is a narrative that is most dominant in the 1990s.

The Deep-Fried Mars Bar and the Scottish Food Industry

Over the last fifteen years a much more confident Scottish food narrative has emerged and established itself in the pages of Scotland's broadsheet press. Indeed, it appears that political devolution, and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, represented a turning point in Scotland's public narratives about its food. This can be attributed in part to increasing cultural confidence, but also (and importantly) to the opportunities that devolution created for the establishment of public sector bodies with the mandate to grow and promote the Scottish food sector – notably the industry leadership body

Scotland Food & Drink, established in 2007. However, these political and institutional developments only built on the longstanding independent efforts of several key 'champions' for Scottish food (notably food writer Sue Lawrence and chef Nick Nairn). Examples from the press chosen at intervals every few years give an indication of how this narrative develops.

By 2001 (two years post-devolution), senior figures in the Scottish food arena, such as the food writer Sue Lawrence, begin to call publicly in the Scottish broadsheets for the establishment of a Scottish food industry body, along the lines of the Irish Food Board, to promote Scottish produce, especially abroad. In the interim, Lawrence calls on the Scottish Tourist Board to do more to promote Scotland's 'fantastic produce and cuisine': 'There are still the deep-fried Mars bar and McHaggis burger jokes, but there continues to be a great deal of ignorance about our wonderful produce; we too have stunning farmhouse cheeses, beef, game, lamb, seafood and the best home-baking around' (Lawrence, 2001, p. 36).

Moving forward, a business column in April 2004 opens by highlighting Scotland's 'natural advantages in producing fish, high-quality meats and soft fruits', contrasting this (inevitably) with the claim that '[m]any Scots seem happy to go along with the joke that the deep-fried Mars bar is the summit of our culinary achievements' (Friedli, 2004, p. 7). The reporter calls for initiatives to take advantage of opportunities overseas for quality Scottish products, pointing out that this will have spin-off benefits for tourism.

By 2008, signalling a step-change in Scottish gastronomic confidence, a Scotsman editorial about gastro-tourism encourages Scotland 'to start promoting itself as a gastro-destination'. The deep-fried Mars bar stereotype is briefly dismissed in order to move on: 'All talk of deep-fried Mars Bars aside, Scotland produces some of the greatest meat, vegetables and seafood in the world, and the whisky speaks for itself. The future marketing of Scotland as a visitor destination should make greater use of our cuisine and restaurants' ('Leader', 2008, p. 29).

And by 2011, an article in the *Herald* reports that Scottish food exports have exceeded £1 billion per annum for the first time, an increase of nearly fourteen per cent. In keeping with the narrative I refer to as 'gastronomic Scotland', this achievement is 'hailed as evidence of increasing international awareness and appreciation of the quality, provenance and heritage of Scottish food' (Ross, 2011, p. 9).

In a final example, an extended interview in the *Herald* in early 2014 with James Withers, Chief Executive of Scotland Food & Drink, focuses almost entirely on Scotland's high-quality produce and the impressive progress made by the Scottish food sector – in line with the official messaging of Scotland Food & Drink. (Indeed, it could be argued that the organization's official communications line,

promoting Scotland internationally as a 'Land of Food and Drink', has successfully populated the Scottish broadsheets.) Quoted here, Withers quickly dismisses an inevitable opening gambit from the reporter about the deep-fried Mars bar, using it as an opportunity to compare national and international perceptions of Scottish cuisine: '"We are a bit self-deprecating about our crisps and fizzy drinks, but overseas Scotland is noted for its salmon, fresh fruit, oats and other natural produce." […] In a nod to Robert Burns, he adds: "We need to see ourselves as others see us"' (Murden, 2014, p. 37).

Discussion and Conclusion

The narrative of 'gastronomic Scotland' is not just an alternative to the deep-fried Mars bar stereotype. Rather, as the examples above show, the deep-fried Mars bar is used *within* the 'gastronomic Scotland' narrative as a springboard for Scottish self-imagination in the realm of food: the deep-fried Mars bar must repeatedly be dismissed in order to move on. Yet arguably these continued references to the deep-fried Mars bar, even by way of dismissing it, actually reinforce the stereotype of the Scottish diet as much as its use as a slur. This may be part of the reason for the deep-fried Mars bar's enduring place in the cultural imaginary, despite the establishment of alternative, more positive narratives about Scottish food and diet. A further risk of the 'gastronomic Scotland' narrative is that conversations about nutrition and cuisine become disconnected from one another, as the 'gastronomic Scotland' narrative addresses the deep-fried Mars bar primarily as a problem for the Scottish food industry. This focus might indirectly benefit nutrition and public health via changes to the representation of the Scottish diet and thus eating behaviour. Yet a focus on quality produce and cuisine risks skipping over serious questions of health and inequality within the nation, and who can afford high-quality, healthy Scottish food.

Thus connecting discussions about food and nutrition in Scotland is key to improving national cultural and economic confidence and public health simultaneously – a connection attempted in the Scottish Government's recent 'Good Food Nation' national food and drink policy. Moreover, the new Scottish Food Commission tasked with delivering the Good Food Nation vision includes wide-ranging experts from the food industry, nutrition and community organizations. It remains to be seen how far these initiatives can address issues of poor diet across the Scottish population. One requirement of intervening effectively is to recognize the damaging effects of the national dietary stereotype not just on the Scottish food sector and economy, but also on public health, as noted above. Although Scotland arguably cannot change patterns of external representation, the media produced and consumed in

Scotland – as well as everyone who speaks or writes about Scottish food and diet – have the power and responsibility to decide which images and stories circulate within the nation.

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