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THE LOCAL WILD FOOD CHALLENGE

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WILD AT HEART: HOW INFORMAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES OCCUR AT THE LOCAL WILD FOOD CHALLENGE

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Abstract

This case study explores the adult learning experience of participants at a food festival, the Local Wild Food Challenge (LWFC). Food festivals, where participants engage in multisensory experiences within a “foodscape,” have the potential to facilitate different informal adult learning processes. Whether incidental or intentional, the learning experienced at the LWFC also fits instrumental and communicative learning paradigms, which are precursors to transformative learning. Learning about and reflecting on new ways to gather, harvest, and prepare wild foods can in turn build the foundation for critical self-reflection around food self-sufficiency, as well as a subtle shift in frames of reference regarding wild foodscapes that lie beyond mainstream corporate food systems. Thus, the study positions the food festival as an important site for informal adult learning, potentially opening participants up to learning about alternative sustainable ways of living.

Résumé

Cette étude de cas explore les expériences d'apprentissage des participants adultes d'un festival gastronomique, le Local Wild Food Challenge (LWFC). Lors de festivals gastronomiques, les participants vivent des expériences multisensorielles dans le cadre de « paysages alimentaires »; ces expériences peuvent offrir différents processus d'apprentissage adulte informels. Peu importe s'il est secondaire ou intentionnel, l'apprentissage qui se produit au LWFC s'inscrit tout de même dans les paradigmes d'apprentissage transitoires importants qui précèdent l'apprentissage transformatif. L'apprentissage et la réflexion sur de nouvelles façons de récolter et de préparer des aliments sauvages peuvent jeter des bases pour une réflexion critique concernant l'autosuffisance alimentaire et favoriser des changements subtils

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en ce qui a trait à notre perception des denrées alimentaires sauvages auxquelles nous avons accès au-delà des systèmes alimentaires d'entreprise dominants. L'étude présente donc le festival gastronomique comme site d'apprentissage adulte important ayant le potentiel de motiver les participants à se renseigner davantage sur des modes de vie alternatifs et durables.

Keywords

food festival, informal adult learning, transformative learning, sustainable ways of living, wild food

Mots clés

festival gastronomique, apprentissage adulte informel, apprentissage transformatif, modes de vie durables, alimentation sauvage

Adult education scholars have focused on the various forms, sites, and processes of learning that may occur during growing, shopping for, cooking, and eating food (Flowers & Swan, 2012, 2016). One site in which to study these adult learning processes that, in our opinion, merits particular attention is the festival, “a social phenomenon, encountered in virtually all human cultures” (Falassi, 1987, p.1)—specifically the food festival. Tourism and event scholarship has identified festivals as important sites for learning (Van Winkle & Bueddefeld, 2021; Van Winkle & Lagay 2012), but, to date, has largely adopted “free choice” and behaviourist models of learning as theoretical lenses to explain the potential for learning in festival contexts (Walter, 2013b, 2016). With the notable exception of Van Winkle and Bueddefeld’s (2021) adult education analysis of the Harvest Moon Festival, few studies have explicitly examined food festivals through an adult learning lens. However, some have observed learning outcomes in these settings, such as changes in visitor perceptions or increased knowledge of food and skill development (e.g., Axelsen & Swan, 2010; Rossetti et al., 2024).

This article extends understanding of how informal learning is embedded in the interactive experiences that participants take part in both before and during the Local Wild Food Challenge (LWFC)—a culinary adventure competition (see also Kajzer Mitchell & Low, 2024; Kajzer Mitchell et al., 2024). We ask what are the processes of informal, incidental, and transformative learning that may occur through participation in a food festival?

Our study draws on semi-structured interviews with LWFC attendees and organizers, and personal observations from a single case study. While the single case study was not designed to capture participants’ post-festival reflections, evidence of informal learning, including potentially transformative learning, engendered by the festival can be gleaned from the accounts provided by participants. The case study provides empirical evidence of the multiple ways in which festival activities and experiences enable attendees to engage in instrumental and communicative learning (Diduck & Mitchell, 2003; Kerton & Sinclair, 2010), either incidentally or deliberately, that may lead to attendees reflecting on their relationships with food production and consumption and food’s role in their lives (cf. Bueddefeld & Duerden, 2022; Mair & Sumner, 2017; Neuhofer et al., 2020). Sumner (2008)

argued that interactions with and around food can be “an entree into larger questions about how we live, how we relate to each other and how we relate to earth” (p. 36) and can potentially spark “a transformative learning experience, opening the possibility of more inclusive, and more sustainable, ways of life” (p. 32).

Literature Review

Research on food festival experiences

Early research interest in food festivals, as with festivals in general, largely focused on their central role in regional economic development (Gibson & Connell, 2016; Jones 2005; Moscardo, 2008). A related strand of research examined the consumer’s perceptions of festivals—demographic and psychographic measures of attendees’ reasons for attending, satisfaction with the event, etc.—in order to better design and market these events to address consumer perceptions and to build memorability (Geus et al., 2016). This *first-generation approach* (Richards, 2021) understood the tourist’s encounters with food as an exchange between producers and consumers (Boswijk et al., 2005).

Attending a food festival, however, entails more than an exchange of a tangible good. Events and festivals are part of an “experience economy” (Manthiou et al., 2014; M. Park et al., 2015) where experiences allow tourists to *do* things such as “engage in activities for self-development, explore multisensory environments, and connect to other people” (Campos et al., 2018, p. 369). To better understand festivals as multifaceted experiences, *second-generation approaches* considered how the role of the attendee changes from being a person in the audience to whom something is done, to being an actor (Richards, 2021). The opportunities for consumers to take the role of “lead users” or “skilled consumers” (Richards, 1996) at festivals have been discussed in general (Rihova et al., 2014; Sfandla & Björk, 2013) and in the context of performing arts and music festivals (Van Winkle & Bueddefeld, 2016; Werner et al., 2020) and cultural festivals (Chen et al., 2019).

Third-generation research on gastronomic tourism experiences has adopted the wider perspective of foodscapes (Richards, 2021), which are “the places and spaces where you acquire food, prepare food, talk about food, or generally gather some sort of meaning from food” (MacKendrick, 2014, p. 16). The *third-generation approach* to understanding food festivals analyzes how a broad range of actors and resources are assembled in a place-based context and connects these people through their shared knowledge and skills (or desire to learn skills) and their shared consumption of foods to co-create festival experiences (Richards, 2021).

Festivals as a learning experience

Learning experiences at festivals have been less commonly studied than other social and cultural experiences at those events, but research has demonstrated that adult learning is often a motive for attending, as well as an outcome of event attendance (Getz, 2012). Bringing a desire to learn skills and share existing knowledge and skills as part of participating in the festival results in various processes of learning that are integral to experiencing the foodscape. For example, Van Winkle and Bueddefeld (2021) affirmed that attending agritourism events enhanced learning about food and agriculture. Einarsen and Mykletun

(2009) found that shared consumption experiences at events might offer opportunities for communal learning. Axelsen and Swan (2010) noted that social interaction with others was an important part of learning at events, and Ikäheimo (2020) concluded that informal discussions can contribute to learning at food events. Kajzer Mitchell & Low (2024) drew on value co-creation frameworks from management and marketing to explain how the interactive experiences at the wild food festival can be interpreted as opportunities for learning. The festival setting can be conceived of as a *ludic learning space* (Kolb & Kolb, 2010), which invites people to learn by “playing” with each other and with food (Kajzer Mitchell et al., 2024). The learning process during these informal learning experiences at visitor attractions such as festivals is influenced by the social nature of the event (Packer & Ballantyne, 2005), and even “learning for fun” can prove to be a potentially transformative experience (Packer, 2006; Van Winkle, 2014). The outcome of such visitor experiences will in turn result in a more knowledgeable individual possessing capacity to learn more in the future (Falk, 2005).

Learning through food

Over the past decade we have seen an increased convergence around adult learning and food (Etmanski, 2015; Janhonen et al., 2018; S. J. Park et al., 2022; Sumner 2016), resulting in a greater understanding of “eating as a pedagogical act” (Sumner, 2008). Food pedagogy provides an example of informal learning; everyday actions of buying (or growing), preparing, and eating food contribute to critical understanding of one’s personal relationship with food systems (Flowers & Swan, 2012). Informal learning occurs outside the structured curricula of formal and non-formal education (Eraut, 2004; Schugurensky, 2000), so it takes place in various contexts, including food festivals. This learning can be *deliberate*, highly self-directed, and guided by the underlying motivations and interests of the various event attendees, or *incidental*, an unexpected result of interactions between festival participants (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Attending a food festival often leads to visitors learning something new, whether novel ingredients and dishes or new ways of cooking (Rossetti et al., 2024). The diffuse and unstructured nature of informal learning poses challenges, such as how to recognize if it has occurred and how to assess what, or whether, learning outcomes have been achieved (Colley et al., 2003).

Following in the footsteps of Sumner (2015), eating and associated experiential activities such as harvesting and preparing ingredients can also be seen as a consciousness-raising process through which individuals become active learners (Kerton & Sinclair, 2010), changing how “they cook, shop, and eat” (Flowers & Swan, 2016, p. 8). Through the interplay of “senses, emotions, bodies and non-humans” (p. 8), food provides various points of entry for adult learning (Etmanski, 2015; Sumner, 2015) to catalyze deep changes in perspective, disrupting taken-for-granted frames of reference (Mezirow, 1991, 1997). Informal learning can therefore be the precursor to more transformative learning, a cornerstone of adult learning theory, which posits that gradual, cumulative, and additive experiences (Walter, 2013a), typically occurring “incidentally” with a “non-determining start” (Nohl, 2015), “dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world” (O’Sullivan, 2002, p.11).

Kerton and Sinclair (2010) characterized two forms of informal learning through food—instrumental learning, which focuses on problem solving and skill development, and communicative learning, which focuses on how learners make meaning and interpret their experiences—that are foundational to transformative learning. Reflecting both the incidental nature of informal learning and Walter’s holistic perspective of transformative learning, Nohl (2015) suggested a five-phase learning journey that starts when “novelty, neither anticipated nor planned, breaks into life” (p. 39). The journey continues with *experimental and undirected inquiry* and *social testing and mirroring*, where adult learners use their own initiative to “explore the novel practices” and later expose these “to the appraisal of other people” (p. 41). Over time, new practices are gradually added to, or replace, old habits, and this *shifting of relevance* takes the newly formed practice “from a marginal into a focused experience” (p. 43).

In the context of food festivals, learning about local foods and producers may over time lead to decisions to buy locally produced foods (Organ et al., 2015). In the final learning phase, *social consolidation and the reinterpretation of biography*, Nohl (2015) argued that new perspectives are stabilized and individuals seek out social interactions that reinforce new habits that enable them “to reinterpret their own biographies and, by doing so, to relate themselves anew to the world” (p. 45). Similarly, exploring one’s relationship to food through adult leisure experiences such as a food festival allows time and space for critical reflection, resistance, and the articulation of alternative food citizenship (Warner et al., 2015).

Research Context

Our source of data is research conducted on the Local Wild Food Challenge (LWFC), a day-long culinary adventure competition with professional chefs and home cooks of all ages preparing unique dishes with one critical requirement: the dishes must include at least *one* wild ingredient. Judging of these dishes is based on four categories: taste, ingredients, effort, and presentation. The LWFC organizers supply grills, ovens, refrigerators, and basic cooking equipment, allowing competing participants to prepare their dishes on site during the festival. While general festival attendees are charged a small fee at the entrance, competitors enter free of charge. In addition to their wild food entry, competitors also bring a description/story to accompany their dish.

The number of food-based events and festivals that have coalesced around wild foods has grown in the last decade (e.g., the Hokitika Wildfoods festival in New Zealand, the Oregon Truffle festival, and the Scottish Wild Food festival, in addition to the LWFC). These food festivals explicitly align themselves with themes of sustainability in production and consumption and alternative food networks, but food festivals overall encompass all aspects of food, including conventional and industrial agriculture and production. More broadly, there is growing interest in wild food gastronomic experiences globally, popularized by emergent practices in fine dining and often led by celebrity chefs (e.g., Noma restaurant in Copenhagen), alternative local food movements (de Jong & Varley, 2018), and technology innovations such as foraging apps (iNaturalist, Forager Diary, Vild MAD).

The LWFC began as a small community event in Eastbourne, New Zealand, in 2008, celebrating the food skills and talents of local people, and encouraging people to source

their own food through hunting, fishing, foraging, and gathering. It has grown from a single one-day informal gathering to become a global network that, until COVID-19 struck in 2020, was held multiple times yearly in different countries (e.g., in the United States, Finland, New Zealand, and Italy). The festival is designed around the mission of promoting understanding, appreciation, and sustainability of local wild food resources in everyday life, guided by the notion that “the deeper you venture into your environment, the more motivation you have to protect it” (Manson, 2015).

Methods

To better understand how attendance at food festivals can lead to forms of adult learning, we undertook a single embedded case study design (Yin, 2009, 2012) of the LWFC. Our prior interest in wild foods and alternative food networks helped us identify the event as a possible research site for studying adult learning in relation to foodscapes. Neither of us had any prior association with the event or its organizers. This instrumental case study (Berg, 2009) provided the opportunity to examine the ways in which learning occurs at the festival. This research builds on prior inductive research designs in the context of events (Houghton, 2008; Van Winkle & Bueddefeld, 2016).

We adopted a descriptive approach to generate an “authentic interpretation of the phenomenon of interest” (Outhwaite & Turner, 2007, p. 93). Through interviews and observations (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Willis et al., 2007) we gathered several people’s perspectives and interpretations of the situations in which they were operating (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

Data Collection

The study draws on qualitative data collected at the LWFC held at Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, USA, in 2017. This site was chosen due to our geographic proximity. A broader research design was planned for further sites to be studied. In 2019, the second author travelled to Italy for the LWFC. Historically heavy rains led to that event being cancelled; however, there was an opportunity to meet with the event founder. Subsequent events did not run due to COVID-19, except in New Zealand, which was under complete travel lockdown, leaving only the original case study. Two main types of data were collected: interviews and observations.

Only the first author attended the Martha’s Vineyard event, as both an “outsider” (observing spectator behaviour) or a “situated actor” (Hertz, 1997, p. viii), and an “insider,” immersing themselves and participating in the event (Mackellar, 2013), to collect data. A convenience sampling of attendees to the Martha’s Vineyard event led to 30 on-site interviews ($n = 30$): 24 visitors and six competing chefs. These were short in-the-moment interviews lasting 10 to 15 minutes (Quinn & Wilks 2013; Walters et al., 2021) as the LWFC was in progress. Due to the noise level at the event, the majority of the interviews were recorded, and notes were taken. In addition, the LWFC founder participated in three in-depth semi-structured interviews averaging 60 minutes each during the period of 2017–2020, in-person on two occasions and once over the phone.

Two interview guides were developed, one for attendees and one for competitors.¹ Aside from a few demographic questions, the interviews were structured around five main themes: (1) what motivated them to attend, (2) what was their prior experience and understanding of wild food, (3) what they felt was significant about their experience, (4) if and how they felt the experience had changed how they thought about wild foods, and (5) if and how they critically reflected on the broader social impact of wild food foraging. All interviews began with a series of introductory questions about their background (e.g., their age, gender, postal code), past attendance at the event, and reasons for attending. We concluded with a series of questions about their sources of learning about wild foods, what they perceived they learned from taking part in the event, and the extent to which they perceived the event may have confirmed or changed how they thought of wild foods. The interview protocol for the competitors included the same core themes but also explored wild food preparation practices in more depth. For example, competitors were asked questions such as “Tell us about the dish you prepared for today’s competition” and “How did you go about preparing for this meal?”

Naturalistic observations garnered insight into the relationships and interactions between audience groups at the LWFC, as well as the relationships between the festival activities and the different participants (Mackellar, 2013). The first author participated by trying different kinds of wild foods and participating in event activities (cf. Mackellar, 2013). Specific attention was placed on watching, listening, and documenting impressions with a view to understanding event programming, the physical layout of the event, and how people engaged with wild foods. Observations were recorded using field notes and taking photos. Image making allowed us to preserve the atmosphere and feeling of the place after the event (Silverman, 2013).

Data Analysis

We initially began data collection guided by an overarching research question investigating the role of informal, incidental, and transformative learning within a wild food festival context, but without a specific theoretical framework in mind. However, as data collection evolved, it became clear that learning was a central theme in participants’ experiences. As such, once all data were collected and transcripts were read and reread, a directed content analysis was applied to better understand the dimensions of the learning experienced at the event.

As suggested by Braun and Clarke (1999), initial codes were used to identify categories within the transcripts. The initial learning categories were based on instrumental learning and communicative learning (Kerton & Sinclair, 2010). These broad concepts, which are precursors of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2003), are sub-categorized (see Table 1) to support data analysis in the context of a food festival. The findings identify instances where a specific form of learning was observed (e.g., IL1 for Instrumental Learning Outcome #1, etc.).

1 We refer to all people who took part in the festival as *participants* and distinguish *competitors* from those who were simply *attendees*.

Table 1
Instrumental and Communicative Learning Outcomes

| Instrumental learning | Communicative learning |
|--|--|
| IL1. Scientific and technical knowledge (e.g., Did participants learn about how to grow or cook food?) | CL1. Insights into one's own interest (e.g., Did participants reflect on their own behaviour toward food?) |
| IL2. Knowledge of legal, administrative, and political procedures (e.g., Did participants learn about alternative food systems, certifications?) | CL2. Insights into the interests of others (e.g., Did participants recognize sharing values with, or holding differing values to, others?) |
| IL3. New social and economic knowledge (e.g., Did participants learn about the place of alternative foods in the overall food system?) | CL3. Communication strategies and methods (e.g., Did participants communicate their knowledge about alternative foods with others?) |
| IL4. Knowledge of potential risks and impacts (e.g., Did participants consider the environment and/or human health as part of their involvement in the alternative food system?) | CL4. Social mobilization (e.g., Did participants encourage others to buy alternative food or become involved in related advocacy issues?) |

Source: Adapted from Kerton & Sinclair, 2010.

As analysis continued, we developed additional codes for categories and subcategories. The categories described in the Findings and Discussion sections reflect a circular “revise and refine” process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, we categorize some of the experiences of LWFC participants as being instrumental or communicative learning (Kerton & Sinclair, 2010). Then we categorize some of the experiences of LWFC participants according to whether they reflect deliberate or incidental adult learning processes (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, 2001). Finally, we consider how different attendees’ experiences reflect Nohl’s (2015) five-phase learning journey, which may indicate transformational learning.

Findings

Grounded in extant theory and relevant prior research, our findings detail the themes that emerged as a result of addressing our research question: what are the processes of informal, incidental, and transformative learning that may occur through participation in a food festival? Throughout this section, quotes from participants and the festival organizer are included to illustrate and support findings.

In our interviews with Martha’s Vineyard LWFC participants, all identified that they had had a positive experience and felt they had learned something new. Following Kerton and Sinclair (2010)—see Table 1—the learning that occurred was analyzed based on instrumental and communicative subcategories. For example, interviewees who had attended the event at least twice reflected on how they had learned new food preparation skills and techniques (instrumental learning, IL1) and how their awareness of wild foods

had increased with each festival attendance through self-reflection and interaction with others (communicative learning, CL1 and CL3). This cumulative learning (over time and combining instrumental and communicative learning) resulted in a broader conception and appreciation of what food is or can be, contributing, for some individuals, to transformative learning (new or altered perceptions about wild food—in particular, what is edible and where it can come from).

Instrumental Learning

Most interviewees shared learning outcomes that were instrumental in nature. Most experienced learning that related to *increased scientific and technical knowledge* (denoted as IL1 in Table 1) about wild food ingredients and preparation techniques, as illustrated by a first-time attendee and by a competitor for whom the 2017 Martha's Vineyard event was their seventh LWFC, respectively:

I tasted new things. I am not sure about the wild goat but I appreciate the different techniques to prepare food. (IL1)

I learnt about new ingredients and preparation techniques. I have learnt more about wild foods here than anywhere. (IL1)

Participants also reported that through the various event activities, such as food demonstrations and tastings, they “experienced new flavours” they were not familiar with or used to. Many learned what kinds of local wild foods could be harvested and eaten (e.g., racoon meat and worms), and how easily accessible they were (e.g., greens and berries)—we characterize the learning that occurred as a combination of IL1 and IL3. Before the LWFC, many participants did not know how or where to gather wild foods:

I have been trying different food [. . .] wild food is more readily available than I thought. I should be more active to gather myself. (IL1, IL3)

Through their participation in the competition, some of the competitors also noted they gained new perspectives on wild food ingredients they were already familiar with. By watching other competing chefs prepare their entries on site, or watching the educational wild food demonstration throughout the event, they gained new information and learned to refine their technical skills related to wild food harvesting and preparation:

It is quite cool seeing different ways people use the same ingredients that I have [. . .] and also the different ways they butcher the deer, sometimes they do it differently and sometimes I learn stuff, different techniques. (IL1)

Due to the nature of the LWFC, where participants of any age are able to enter the culinary competition, many of the younger adults taking part have grown up attending the annual festival with their parents. Through their active contribution over time, and the support and guidance of their parents and other adult festival participants, they have developed practical skills and knowledge about wild food foraging and their local environment that has evolved over several years, demonstrating increased instrumental learning over time. The LWFC founder explained:

We knew these kids when they were seven, eight, and nine, entering the LWFC with their parents hovering over them. They have taken everything they've learned that we have taught them through these years about wild food, and now they're on their own with . . . their own foraging knowledge, and they are doing it for themselves and teaching their mates [. . .] they really live it now. (IL1, IL3)

They understand what it is to forage, hunt, fish, dive, whatever it is, garden, barter . . . and they came in with these incredible dishes with great stories about how they harvested and what they understand about where they live and how it should be treated [. . .] even if it [LWFC] stopped tomorrow, that has been worth it to see those kids get it. And they're off and running, they're on their own. They'll teach their kids. (IL2, IL4)

Communicative Learning

The findings point to LWFC participants engaging in various kinds of discourse with others where they shared their wild food knowledge, which in turn helped them reflect on their own and others' behaviour in relation to wild food. For example, critical self-reflection manifested itself in thoughts around aspiring to food self-sufficiency, feeling "empowered to be independent," feeling the need "to learn more" about wild foods and "be more creative, more experimental" in their food preparation, or expressing the desire to try to adopt new behaviours, such as gathering wild foods themselves. Participants also gained insights into the interests of others, for example, by learning about the abilities and skills of people in the local community. Some participants also reflected on fellow attendees' differing values and assumptions, such as other people forgetting where food comes from, or being concerned about risks and safety of wild foods (e.g., the racoon meat having rabies).

Participants referred to various conversations with other people, before, during, and after LWFC events, where they either shared their own knowledge or sought the expertise of others. Pre-event activities, such as planning ahead what competition entry to make (CL1), necessitated social interactions and conversations among family members, local chefs, and foraging experts (CL2 and CL3):

So I struggled for a long time to come up with a good way of cooking rabbit . . . I was talking to a chef and . . . we were talking about different ways I could soften wild meats and she said she uses buttermilk . . . She was just my mum's friend, but we know quite a few chefs . . . and I have been able to talk to some people. (CL1, CL2, CL3)

During the event, attendees would gather in a common open food preparation area to engage in conversations with contestants, the event organizers, and other visitors. Attendees and competing chefs entered into dialogue about the dish being prepared and where the ingredients had been sourced. In addition to these informal ways of learning, competing chefs shared their knowledge with others through a formal short written story detailing the idea and intent behind their dish, and how wild food ingredients were gathered.

For one participant, this included sharing the story of how their dish was inspired by family recipes passed down through generations but presented in a novel way, which included local wild food ingredients:

This recipe has been in our family for generations [. . .] Living on [Martha's] Vineyard and participating in the Wild Food Challenge has given me the opportunity to prepare this dish in a way it has never been done before, with fresh lobster I myself pulled from the sea. (CL1, CL3)

In discussing the learning experience, the same participant shared how proud they felt in sourcing the ingredients and reflected on the new personal insights gained as a result—in particular the need to show respect for nature and the time commitment involved in wild food preparation: “You have to work hard, [up to] 17 hours to get 10 wild ingredients” (CL1, CL2, CL3).

Among competitors there was also evidence of social mobilization and communicative learning throughout the year leading up to the LWFC. In discussions with participating chefs, they would all share personal stories of engaging with or involving others (e.g., friends, family members, and even the LWFC organizers themselves) in the wild food preparations between LWFC events, whether it was volunteering information (e.g., where to find wild food ingredients, how to prepare) or resources (e.g., time and physical means, such as providing a boat for fishing). One participant shared how it had become an important family event, where all family members “would think about [the LWFC] all year along,” and where children were encouraged to participate in gathering seasonal wild food ingredients during different months of the year (CL3, CL4).

Transformative Learning

While the researcher did not observe, and participants did not report, dramatic transformative learning occurring, some first-time visitors noted instrumental or communicative learning leading to subtle shifts in their frame of reference, specifically related to sampling new kinds of food and tastes. Trying new foods not commonly found in mainstream market spaces, such as pickled or cooked worms (see Figures 1 and 2), or watching wild food preparations that attendees had not seen before, opened their minds to new experiences, and challenged some of the attendees' perceptions of the role and value of wild foods. As one new attendee noted:

I am new to it [wild foods], not familiar and I am just starting to learn. It has opened my eyes to different kinds of food, and how to prepare, like trapping animals. (IL1 and IL3).

New-found knowledge about wild foods harvesting and preparation opened participants up to other, often marginalized, ways of knowing. While the LWFC was described as “weird and off the beaten path,” it also contributed to personal self-reflection and some participants' desire to shift their own behaviour toward food more broadly. As noted by another attendee, they felt inspired “to keep being open about trying new [food]” (CL1).

Figure 1
Unusual Wild Foods on Offer at Local Wild Food Challenge: Pickled Worms

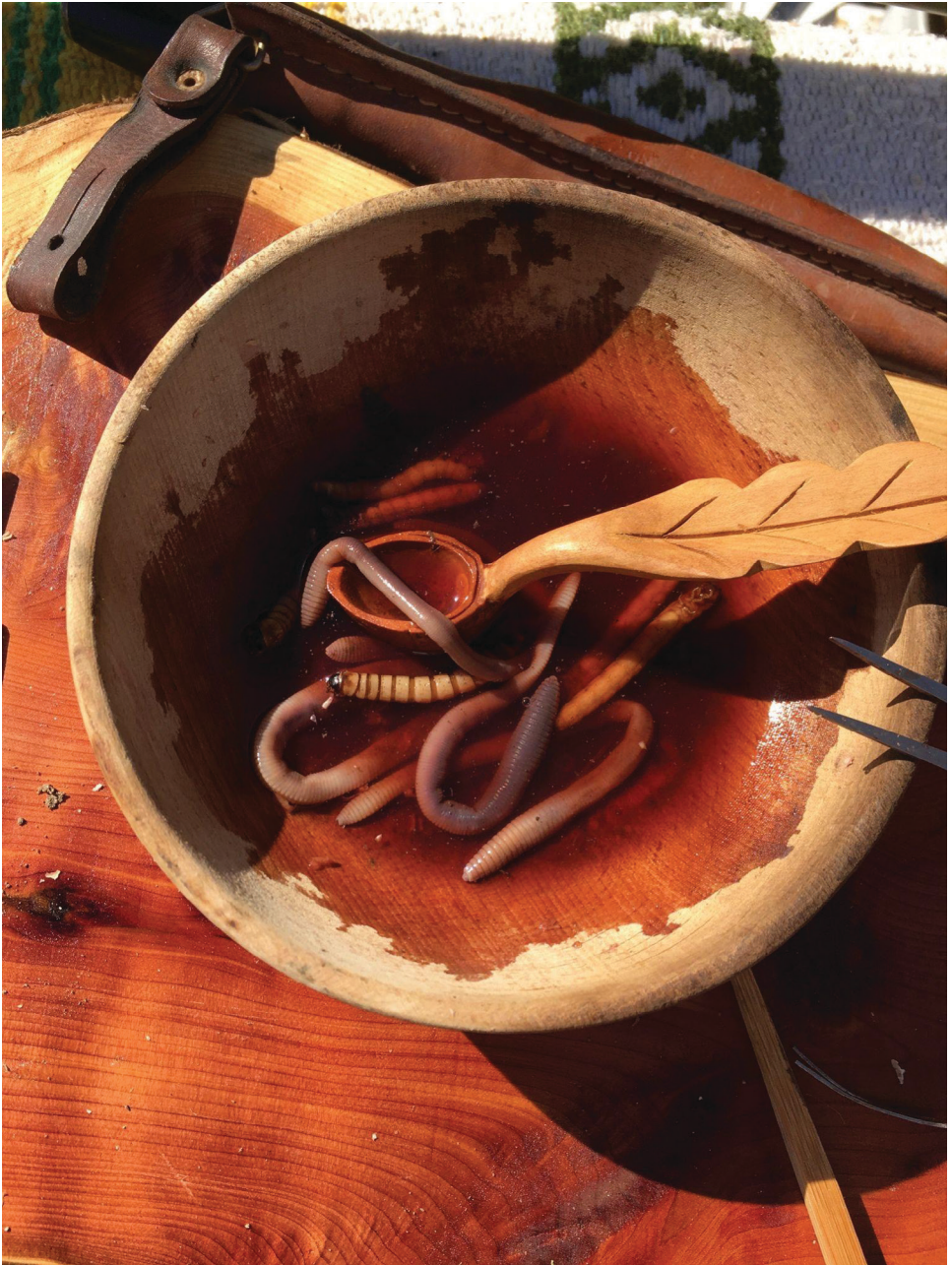


Figure 2

Unusual Wild Foods on Offer at Local Wild Food Challenge: Cooked Worms



Some participants showed a slight shift in frame of reference, specifically related to wild food sourcing. A first-time local competitor shared:

Seeing what you can gather in your own backyard has been the most fun . . . you can find things that are hidden, that seems like a weed or something you think is disposable but it is actually something you can consume, which is pretty cool. (IL1, IL2, IL3)

Similarly, other competitors shared stories of beginning to gather wild foods when going about their daily routines, such as walking in their neighbourhoods. A competitor who had attended prior LWFC events, and had only recently decided to enter with a wild food dish of their own, shared just such a moment in recounting why they were participating:

There were these white acorns outside my house . . . and there were acorns dropping on my car, and my baby kept putting it in his mouth, and I was thinking I should do something, try and make something out of them, and it was kind of like a sign, that I should enter [the LWFC] this year . . . It was fun and I brought my kid with me everywhere. I went and foraged by the beach, around my house, my backyard, just looking for ingredients that we can use. (IL1, IL3)

We begin to see how the festival experience mobilizes participants and contributes to the creation of a narrative where alternative food consumption becomes a possibility outside of the dominant corporate food system.

Two long-established participants who had competed in numerous LWFCs at various event locations exhibited a gradual transformation through critical reflection on their personal values and actions. When asked to reflect on their own learning stemming from their many festival experiences, we see a sense of self emerging that more deliberately embraces alternative food preparation and consumption practices:

There are so many ways to sustain yourself, that is something nice that I am learning how to do. I am used to buying stuff, and now I can go and forage with [the festival organizer] and figure out what mushrooms to use . . . now I can actually go out and find this beautiful dish. (IL2, IL2, IL3, CL1, CL2, CL4)

We have competed since the first year ever . . . and we have been competing ever since. I am almost enjoying the foraging more, especially with the kids [. . .] It connects you with the earth and what is out there and makes you respect what is out there. (IL4, CL2, CL3)

Discussion

This article uses an adult education lens to understand the variety of experiences that participants had at the LWFC but also the ways that they experienced the festival. To paraphrase Tolstoy, all participants experience the same festival but each participant experiences it in their own way. As the Findings section shows, participation in the LWFC fostered informal and, for some, transformative learning, including participants developing new skills, expanding their knowledge of wild foods, and reflecting on their relationship to food systems, often expressing greater awareness of alternative ways of sourcing and consuming food. In the findings we analyzed their experiences as being processes of informal learning, specifically instrumental and communicative learning. The goal was not to quantify whether the number of instances of any particular type of learning was more prevalent, although in the findings we have interpreted various interview responses as being indicative of the participant experiencing a specific form of instrumental or communicative learning. This characterization shows how prevalent adult learning through food is during the LWFC.

Many participants (especially competitors) arrive with some form of deliberate but not highly structured learning intent, where control of the learning lies in the hands of the individual themselves (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, 2001). For example, competitors often take the opportunity to share the direct experience of gathering wild foods in preparation for the festival with others, and as a result they may refine their recipe ideas or benefit from tips about foraging or cooking techniques through talking to family, friends, and other cooks. Even those who start from a position of wanting “a good day out” may end up seeing and doing novel and interesting things (Falk & Dierking, 1992; Rounds, 2004, as cited in Falk, 2005) and thus may learn incidentally. An example of potentially incidental learning at the LWFC came from one woman who had attended multiple LWFC events and was at this event with her children. Her interview demonstrated she had limited knowledge of and interest in wild food per se, and no personal experience of wild food gathering or preparation. While she appreciated “tasting different food,” attending the LWFC, ultimately, was primarily “a nice day out.” What she said prevented her from greater wild food engagement was “I have no time. I forage at Whole Foods.” Nonetheless, even this comment expressed her unconscious reflection on her own attitudes and behaviour toward food and her foodscape.

In Table 2, we summarize how attendance at the LWFC resulted in deliberate and incidental adult learning processes.

Table 2*Deliberate and Incidental Adult Learning at Local Wild Food Challenge*

| Type of engagement | LWFC event experience | Adult learning processes |
|---------------------------|--|--|
| Deliberate | Competitors foraging, hunting, and conserving their own wild food ingredients (before the event) | Competitors use and refine their existing knowledge and skills, while adding new knowledge and skills |
| | Competitors creating a story to accompany their LWFC entry | Competitors contribute to instrumental and communicative learning by providing an explanation of the ingredients used and the inspiration for their dish |
| | Competitors preparing and assembling dishes <i>in situ</i> during the LWFC | Competitors create new menus and recipes, often using new knowledge and skills |
| Incidental | Interactions with the food-scape (e.g., wild food and local beverage tasting) | Engagement with vendors, suppliers, and other attendees and stakeholders (e.g., competitors, volunteers, local food providers), and with food "artifacts" (e.g., foods available to sample), resulting in the ambience and atmosphere of a festival experience |
| | Competitors tasting the meal they made themselves, or meals that other competitors have made | Peer-to-peer sharing of the learning outputs |
| | Local wild food experts leading food preparation demonstrations and workshops (e.g., apple cider making) | Attendees are involved in interactive activities and physical engagements that capture their attention and invite them to engage with local food cultures |

Evidence of transformational learning is much harder to pinpoint, even though Kerton and Sinclair (2010) suggested that instrumental or communicative learning is a precursor to transformation, in that there were no "pre and post" event interviews by which to assess the extent of any transformation of individuals' views about food and food systems regarding sustainability. Nor were participants followed over time at several events to identify how ongoing exposure to wild foods might result in sustained disruption of

taken-for-granted frames of reference (as Mezirow, 2003, frames transformative learning) or the extent of mastery of learning (cf. Van Winkle & Bueddefeld, 2021). However, our analysis of participants' and competitors' interviews does reveal how people's festival experiences can be characterized by Nohl's (2015) five-phase model. In Table 3, we highlight quotes from our interviews to show how some LWFC participants' experiences align with Nohl's five-phase learning journey.

As identified earlier, Nohl (2015) departed from the majority of transformative learning approaches by suggesting that "the seed of the new orientation and practices may be planted long before they gain relevance and become the focused concern of the respective actor" (p. 46). Thus, transformative learning may begin unnoticed, incidentally, and sometimes even casually, when a new practice is added to old habits. This is relevant in the context of the LWFC because the very act of coming to the event and viewing and sampling at the tasting tables—in effect Nohl's first phase, the "non-determining start"—may sow the seeds of self-reflection and a new orientation. Old habitual practices (e.g., relying on corporate food systems) may be called into question when confronted by the "foreignness" of wild foods, creating a free space for novel practices (e.g., foraging and self-sufficiency) to come into focus.

In relation to Nohl's second phase of "experimental and undirected inquiry," individuals attending the LWFC began to explore new alternative food practices, acquiring new knowledge in the process. For example, LWFC visitors shared stories of experimenting by gathering and hunting for wild foods they previously had perceived as inedible (e.g., a weed or white acorns become a source of nutrition). Aligned with Nohl's transformative learning ethos, these inquiries into alternative wild food were not directed or organized by others but were based on festival participants' own initiatives. For those participants who chose to compete in the LWFC, these inquiries were both individual and collective in nature, meaning instances of social learning (Phase 3) were evident (e.g., preparing wild food festival entries with friends and family through the year). The "social testing and mirroring" that Nohl referred to occur not only during the festival itself (e.g., through comments and observations made by attendees, or through festival judges' feedback), but also after and in between festivals (e.g., gaining feedback from like-minded others and then reflecting on it). For example, by speaking and listening to others and considering the knowledge and skills of peers during the months leading up to the LWFC event, competitors continued to experiment and to adjust their new practices.

In line with Nohl's fourth and fifth phases—"shifting relevance" and "social consolidation and reinterpretation of biography"—we begin to see a subtle shift and expansion in perceptions of the relevance of alternative, potentially more sustainable, food practices. Wild food gathering and preparation became more present in the everyday (e.g., foraging around the house, at the beach, in the backyard), and the LWFC event (encompassing its broader community) became an important site where "actors find social relations that stabilize their new practices" (Nohl, 2015, p. 44). For example, ongoing participation in the LWFC required deliberate efforts by competing participants to engage with alternative, more sustainable, "foodscapes" through dialogue and often hands-on activities with others in the broader wild food community. This dialogue led some participants to reflect on their previous relationships to a variety of foodscapes, especially the conventional, commercial one, and to express a new-found appreciation of the alternatives and the communities that exist around these alternative foodscapes.

Table 3*Evidence of Nohl's Five Phases of Learning at the Local Wild Food Challenge*

| Nohl's five-phase model | Description | Quote from LWFC participant |
|---|--|--|
| Phase 1—The non-determining start | Transformative learning has its beginnings when something new, that a person neither plans nor expects, comes into their life. | "I am new to it [wild foods], not familiar and I am just starting to learn. It has opened my eyes to different kinds of food." |
| Phase 2—Experimental and undirected inquiry | Individuals "explore the novel practices" (p. 41) that they had become aware of previously. This tends toward unstructured exploration without an "ultimate goal" (p. 41) in mind. | "I have been trying different food [. . .] wild food is more readily available than I thought. I should be more active to gather myself." |
| Phase 3—Social testing and mirroring | Individuals pursue their new practices (activities) in a less experimental and more directed fashion. They look for feedback from like-minded people while also exposing their practices to a wider community. Based on their reflections on feedback received, individuals start to conceive of an insider group with whom they can communicate and share their new knowledge and skills more freely. | "So I struggled for a long time to come up with a good way of cooking rabbit . . . I was talking to a chef and . . . we were talking about different ways I could soften wild meats and she said she uses buttermilk . . . She was just my mum's friend, but we know quite a few chefs . . . and I have been able to talk to some people." |
| Phase 4—Shifting relevance | An individual's newly developed practices move from a "marginal into a focused experience" (p. 43)—in other words, the relevance of these practices becomes more prominent. Nohl asserted that in order for transformative learning processes to occur, this shift is critical. | "There were these white acorns outside my house . . . and there were acorns dropping on my car, and my baby kept putting it in his mouth, and I was thinking I should do something, try and make something out of them, and it was kind of like a sign, that I should enter [the LWFC] this year [. . .] It was fun and I brought my kid with me everywhere. I went and foraged by the beach, around my house, my backyard, just looking for ingredients that we can use." |

| Nohl's five-phase model | Description | Quote from LWFC participant |
|--|---|--|
| Phase 5—Social consolidation and reinterpretation of biography | Individuals reflect on and revisit their life story, which they are now seeing from a new perspective. They become immersed in a new social group, large or small, that gives continuity and form to their new practices and their new outlook. | “And [if it were up to me], even if it [LWFC] stopped tomorrow, that has been worth it to see those kids get it. And they're off and running, they're on their own. They'll teach their kids.” |

Adult educators should note that the LWFC is not a conventional festival “event.” The physical or psychological barriers between visiting attendees and “performers” are much lower than would be experienced or expected in other festival settings, such as a music festival or a writers’ festival, where an “audience” is physically seated and separated from the “action,” and social norms prescribe quiet observation, enjoyment, and contemplation. In contrast, participation at the LWFC is more active, embodied, and more visceral by design. Through direct contact with alternative wild foods—taste, smell, and touch, where participants feel novel textures in the hands and mouth (Van Winkle & Lagay, 2012)—learning at the LWFC is a highly multisensory experience. For example, it can be argued that the wild food dishes created by LWFC competitors become creative and “imaginative outlets” pointing to a more sustainable way of living, which, by connecting to the senses, assist adults in “identifying and bringing to a conscious level feelings, emotions, and social or cultural responses to then be critically reflected upon” (Simpson, 2006, para. 4). Thus, our study also demonstrates how multisensory learning environments, where adult learners invoke more than one sense simultaneously, have the potential to create more affective experiences that promote individual and collective transformation. This responds to scholarship emphasizing the use of embodied and performative practices (Sumner, 2015) to provide “spaces for creative imagination and experimentation” that realize transformation to sustainability (Bentz et al., 2022, p. 687).

Finally, our study has some limitations that offer opportunities for future research. First, realizing the transformational potential of events is not straightforward. Gastro-nomic experiences like the LWFC may contribute to romanticizing desirable outcomes and the “alternative.” Notably, this may stem from participants not subjecting the LWFC to the same critical reflection as more conventional mainstream food experiences in terms of potential social, environmental, and ethical consequences (Forssell & Lankoski, 2015). Second, the LWFC may also have unintended negative consequences for the wild food movement by not considering (or directly addressing) issues of accessibility to wild foods beyond the day of the event, and not considering how promoting the use of wild foods can have an impact on the sustainability of wild food ecosystems.

Conclusions

This study explores the role of food festivals and the many ways in which place-based festival activities and experiences can facilitate informal adult learning processes that serve as precursors to transformative learning. It contributes to a growing recognition that engaging with naturally produced foods as a leisure pursuit presents a potential pathway to liberation from corporatization of foods and unsustainable cycles of food production (Schmalz et al., 2019). Our findings show that the festival, as a leisure event, can indeed be an important site for informal adult learning, contributing to participants learning new alternative ways of gathering, harvesting, and preparing food. Collectively, the narratives shared by festival participants begin to demonstrate critical self-reflection around food self-sufficiency and subtle shifts in frames of reference regarding an alternative food reality outside mainstream food systems.

Festivals, such as the unique gastronomic experience created at the Local Wild Food Challenge, provide numerous transferable insights for adult educators. First, our findings show that by convening an informal learning experience where participants cook for others, creating and sampling dishes they may otherwise have never attempted, adult learners are invited to learn something new about unfamiliar "wild foodscapes" and begin to learn their way out of unsustainable food consumption. By "purposely delivering activities beyond visitors' comfort levels" (Pung et al., 2020, p. 4), adult educators can begin to create opportunities and sow the seeds for transformative learning.

Second, the role of the relational and communicative processes among different festival participants (competitors and other attendees) begin to highlight how informal social interactions, before, during, and after a learning "event," may enhance adult learners' ability to improve their sustainability literacy and to develop their creative potential and capacity to problem-solve and innovate, not just as individuals but also as groups. Future research would benefit from acknowledging the collective nature of knowledge generation for sustainability (cf. Kilgore, 1999; Choudry, 2015) by conducting pre- and post-event interviews at informal learning sites like the LWFC to better understand how adult learners engage and learn both individually and collectively from one another as they explore novel sustainable ways of living, and expose their new knowledge and skills to critical reflection by a wider learning community.

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