

Say cheese! Or say pies? Building and using ‘place-name’ imagery from the “Rural Heart of England”

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Introduction

In the world of commerce, a major contemporary marketing challenge concerns product differentiation. In this paper we consider product differentiation in the market for food, and in particular the distinction between “mass-produced” and “quality food”. The former are produced in large quantities, often at a variety of locations, and are designed to be marketed at high volume, both nationally and even internationally. The latter are produced in more limited quantities, at a small number of locations, are made from higher quality ingredients, and are designed to be distributed through regional and national niche markets, although such markets are potentially quite large. A quality product may be thus defined as being differentiated in a positive manner by reason of one or more factors from the standard product. It is recognised as such by the consumer, and consequently can command a price premium if effectively marketed (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000).

Quality food products can themselves be divided into two groups, with this division also being based upon production techniques, production area, and ingredients used. The first group comprises “true” quality products based upon folk foods and are often hand-made in a traditional manner and from traditional ingredients; they originate from a specific place, the name of which has acquired an “assurance of quality” meaning for consumers, and they carry the name of this place in order to communicate a symbolism to potential customers -- although these customers may

not know where this place is in the “real world”. Marketing is commonly viewed as a weak link in the production of such products, with limitations for the development of the rural areas associated with their production (Jenkins and Parrott, 1997). The second group of quality foods comprises “pretenders”. These foods are marketed using the type of place name association created for “true” quality products, but they are commonly produced away from the “place” with which they claim association, and employ non-traditional methods and non-traditional ingredients. The foods are also aimed at the niche markets of the “true” quality products, rather than mass markets, with the objective of expanding these market niches. These pretenders form a particular challenge to “true” quality foods in an era of economic globalization, when the products of popular culture hold sway, when tastes are constantly changing (or being changed), and when products aimed at a more selective market have to compete with a multitude of opponents. In addition, although the “pretenders” may be produced in greater quantity and at a lower quality, they are often promoted by large corporations with enormous advertising budgets; these corporations can make them appear to be as good as, if not better, than the higher quality, more expensive products, upon which they are based.

The competitive advantage sought by quality foods is based on the observation that popular culture has less spatial variation than does folk culture and consequently cannot easily take advantage of location- or place name association in order to promote sales. Indeed, Ted Relph has gone so far as to suggest that popular culture “produces a profound *placelessness*, a spatial standardization that diminishes cultural variety and demeans the human spirit” (Jordan and Domosh, 1999: 295). However, placelessness has probably been an overstated characteristic of popular culture, and careful marketing of a unique product by the use of place or place name association can still be used to enable a more expensive and better quality “folk” product to be differentiated from its less expensive but more “popular” competitors. Such a strategy can be useful in the economic development of both “lagging” and more developed regions (Bowler 1998). A classic example of this is the selling of “Champagne”, which has managed to bring a cachet, and a premium price to a product that may be otherwise little different from many

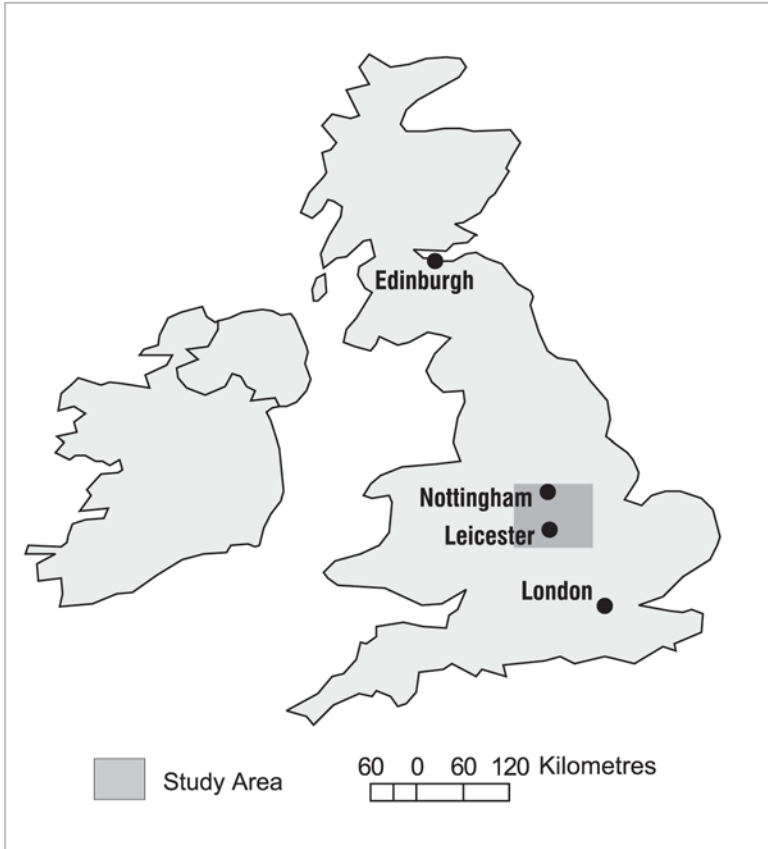


Figure 1: Location of study area.

other sparkling wines. In this case the place name “Champagne” guarantees the quality and character of the product, while conveying to a limited degree a sense of place, in this case France. Of course, such quality products have to be able to ensure that their advantage cannot be taken from them - in other words they need to ensure that their geographical identity cannot be used by mass produced products that simply reproduce the place name of the folk product to boost their own market shares (Moran, 1993a and 1993b).

Fortuitously modern legislation and regulations, including international recognition, make it possible to have such safeguards.

Two British case studies of such product differentiation are discussed in this paper. Both examples represent attempts to improve the marketing of a quality food product by using a regional name to differentiate it from their competitors producing an arguably inferior product. One of these products, namely Blue Stilton Cheese - the “King of English Cheeses”,¹ has already gained legal recognition within the European Union (EU) enabling producers to use place name association in promoting the product. Producers of the second product - the Melton Mowbray Pork Pie - are still trying to take advantage of EU legislation to ensure the ongoing success of the product. Both quality foods are produced in and around the county of Leicestershire, an area which calls itself “the heart of rural England”.

Stilton Cheese

Many localised folk cheeses are produced throughout Britain, based in part on variations in the physical environment within which the raw material (milk) is produced, for example the quality of the pastures grazed by the milk cows. In part localised cheeses are also associated with particular breeds of milk cow. But other factors can be important. For example, Stilton cheese, a blue-veined cream cheese, was probably developed (not invented) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a result of increased demand in London, and better transportation links to supply that demand (Hickman, 1995). The Great North Road provided the link, and the town of Stilton (then in Huntingdonshire, now in Cambridgeshire) was a traditional stopping point for travellers on this routeway. Although many competing cheeses were produced, locally and elsewhere, what became known as Stilton cheese proved more successful because it was made from top quality ingredients, while the product was standardised in terms of shape, size, and quality quite early in the first decades of the eighteenth century. Consequently, at its height, Stilton became the market-place for retailing huge quantities of cheese, with thousands of cheeses being sold each week. Today Stilton is the dominant blue cheese within Britain (with some 60%

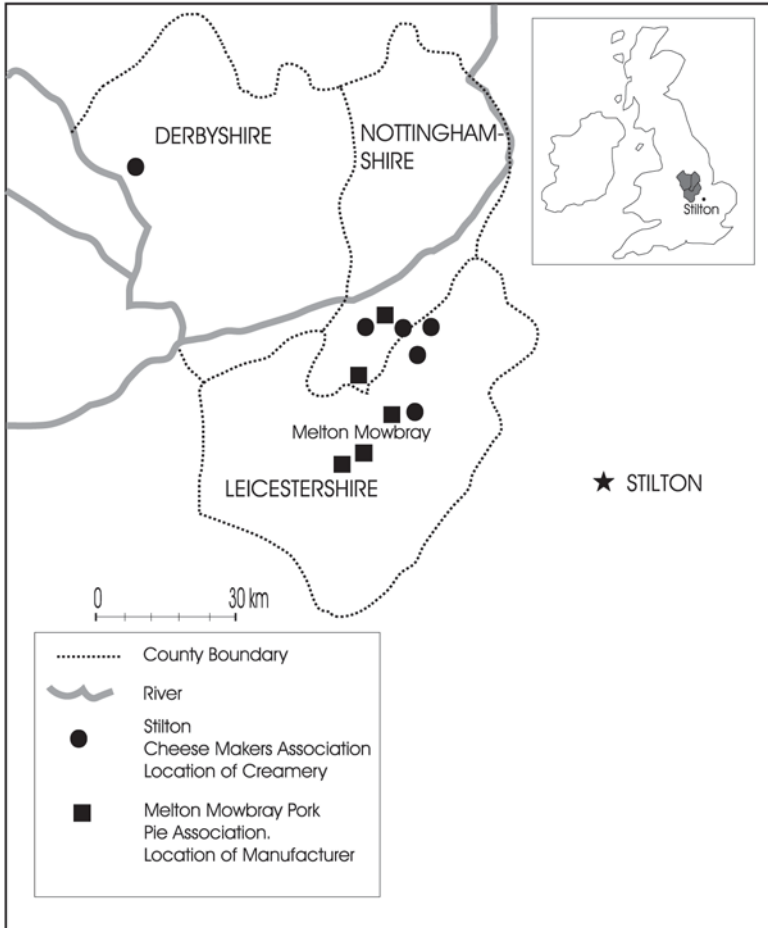


Figure 2: *Members of Associations.*

of the total market); its main competitor is imported Danish Blue (with perhaps 16% of this market).

Interestingly, Stilton cheese was not produced in or around Stilton, but farther north in the vicinity of Melton Mowbray, in present-day Leicestershire, as well as in adjoining counties in the East Midlands (Fig. 2). However, in the days of the coaching trade this market town was not readily accessible, and thus the cheese was transported out of its area of origin to be sold. When the railway

arrived on the scene, Melton Mowbray and its environs became more accessible, coaching towns became unnecessary, and the cheese market at Stilton collapsed almost overnight - although the well-known name was retained for the cheese. At this time, fox-hunting was increasing its position as the "sport" of choice among the upper classes in Britain. Foxes were becoming increasingly common in the Leicestershire area, perhaps as a result of land enclosures which produced an environment that was ideal for these animals, and a method of exterminating this animal was converted into a "sport". The railways enabled the aristocracy to reach Melton Mowbray ("Melton") -- which became a fox-hunting mecca from the mid-eighteenth century onwards -- with comparative ease.² They discovered Stilton cheese and, as Britain's 'tastemakers' (Lynes, 1954), they spread its popularity far and wide. Consequently new producers appeared, ranging from individual farmers, to cooperatives, to individual dairy owners.

Although the production of Stilton cheese has been standardised to some extent for nearly three hundred years, it is still handmade and varies in texture and taste from dairy to dairy; as a consequence different cheeses are produced that appeal to different palates, and thus to different markets. It is the only British cheese that has its own certification trademark. Stilton cheese in general has mostly been seen as a specialised and expensive product, that is more commonly eaten by the upper classes, and only consumed by others on particular occasions. This gives Stilton cheese a certain cachet but does limit its appeal and availability to a more widespread consumer base, and thus restricts the overall demand. It is seen, however, as a food for special occasions, and Christmas-time still sees a boom in sales.

Although traditionally a product of the East Midlands, Stilton cheese has been produced elsewhere, and is in competition with other "up-market" blue-veined cream cheeses (such as Danish Blue and Gorgonzola). Consequently, a Stilton Cheese Makers' Association (SCMA) was set up to help protect producers and promote the cheese. It limited the name to cheese produced by recognised dairies - in the traditional region of production - following traditional recipes and modes of manufacture. Currently Stilton cheese is produced by seven dairies of variable size and

capacity in the designated counties of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Six of these dairies are members of the Association (Fig. 2). Although production levels are somewhat flexible, they are influenced by the limitations placed on the supply of the product by the terms of recognition of the SCMA. They are also restricted by the relatively limited shelf-life of Stilton cheese which complicates its marketing on a widespread geographical basis.

In order to protect the suppliers of the cheese further from competition, the SCMA successfully applied for a **Protected Designation of Origin (PDO)** (Regulation 2081/92) certification from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF), following EU legislation designed to protect the production of traditional products that have “exceptional reputation and renown”. This certification, which is the same as that achieved by the makers of Champagne, restricts production to licensed producers within the geographical area made up by the three counties of Leicestershire, Derbyshire, and Nottinghamshire. This region has not only been defined by tradition, by the human occupation of space and by the creation of a place name association, but this definition has now been given a legalised boundary that can be clearly defended in law against other producers. Indeed the designation has been successfully tested against a producer in Wisconsin. The SCMA is ever-vigilant in preventing potential producers from (mis)using the name of Stilton for their own cheese.

Melton Mowbray Pork Pies

The Melton Mowbray Pork Pie (MMPP) has a similar history to Stilton Cheese, and was developed in the same part of Britain (Hickman, 1997). Pies have been a traditional part of the British diet since at least medieval times, and the ‘raised ‘ or ‘standing’ pie of which the MMPP is an example developed during medieval and Elizabethan times. Originally the pastry “coffin” was just a way of containing and protecting the meat during baking. It was then thrown away, not eaten. Now it is an integral part of the meal. Trevor Hickman, the biographer of the MMPP is convinced that

the “name Melton Mowbray is synonymous with pork pies” (1997: 7). Certainly it is the best known variety within Britain. The MMPP achieved fame for two major reasons. First, the cheesemaking industry in the Melton area produced large amounts of surplus whey when the cheese curds were removed, and whey mixed with bran is an excellent food to feed pigs. Thus a waste product could be converted into a financial asset. Second, the aristocratic hunters who came to “follow the hounds” learned about this convenient food from their servants who carried the pies in their pockets, and soon ordered them served at the ritual hunt breakfasts. As tastemakers, these aristocrats spread the fame of the MMPP to their London clubs (where they also expected them to be served) and elsewhere within Britain. Thus this product of local culture and tradition became marketed -- originally along stagecoach routes -- outside of its first area of production. The commercialisation and promotion of the MMPP is officially dated at 1831.

The Melton Mowbray Pork Pie, like Stilton cheese, became associated with special occasions; indeed Christmas-time remains the most important season for production and consumption of the pie (Hickman, 1997: 96). As with Stilton, the MMPP was similar to some of its competitors, but the method of production and the recipe were quite distinctive, and gave it a uniqueness that became part of its cachet. Again as with Stilton there are variations between the pies depending upon the tastes and the recipe of the producer; but it has been agreed that all pies produced according to certain standards, and within a designated area, are allowed to be called Melton Mowbray Pork Pies. The production standards and recipes supposedly follow traditional patterns while the production area reflects the natural and human boundaries of the market area of Melton Mowbray (about a 25 mile [40 km] radius around the town). However, as the production area is not made up of political units (counties) as is the case with Stilton, but rather reflects one expert’s opinion of where the line should be drawn, some sections of the boundary have been disputed by other producers, and this may cause problems in the future.

In recent years the producers of MMPPs had become concerned about sales of their pies. Sales have suffered for several reasons, but one that could be addressed by the producers in the Melton

Mowbray area related to a belief that the name was being misused.³ It was being applied to pork pies that were produced outside of the traditional region, and to machine-made pies which did not follow the traditional recipe or method of production. Such changes had been made by large-scale producers either because they simplify the production process itself, or because they enabled it to be marketed on a much more widespread basis. The true Melton Mowbray Pork Pie, even more than Stilton cheese, has a very limited shelf life -- of only a few days if its best condition is to be maintained. The possibility of protecting the name legally was investigated, but current law was believed to offer little protection.⁴ Consequently the Melton Mowbray Pork Pie Association (MMPPA) was set up in 1998, and in 1999 it applied to register the MMPP as a product with **Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)** under EU Regulation 2081/92. PGI is a designation open to products which are produced or processed or prepared within a specific geographical area, and with a reputation, features, or qualities attributable to that area. It differs from the **PDO** designation in that the ingredients for the MMPP (flour, pork, spices, etc.) most often come from outside the designated area (although only British pork is used). To gain a **PGI** certification, the product itself has to be produced within the designated area. As with Stilton cheese, however, and despite the “place” implications of the **PGI**, few consumers outside of the East Midlands know where Melton Mowbray is, and fewer still know where the MMPPs are produced. But once again this lack of knowledge has not detracted from the symbolism associated with the MMPP.

There are currently five members of the Melton Mowbray Pork Pie Association who produce within the designated area, following traditional recipes and procedures (Fig. 2). More so than with Stilton cheese, the producers vary considerably in size and productivity, ranging from individual butchers shops to one large-scale concern which dominates overall production. All producers of MMPPs currently recognised as legitimate by the MMPPA are members of the Association. There are other producers, outside of this area, who make a similar pie, following traditional recipes and procedures, who do not use the MMPP name, and at least one who does. This producer bought out another one who was located within

the designated area, but then moved his production outside of the official boundary. His exclusion is currently a subject of debate within the MMPPA. There are other producers who make a so-called (i.e. “pretender”) MMPP using different recipes and procedures, and who produce their pies elsewhere. Some of these are well known brands within Britain -- such as Marks and Spencer. It is principally these producers who are targeted by the MMPPA, and who would be most affected if the **PGI** designation was to be granted. Other pork pies are not seen as competitors to the same extent, for the MMPP is seen as an “up market” product, directed at a niche market. As with Stilton cheese, a distinct place name association has been generated by Melton Mowbray Pork Pies over the past two hundred years. Although the application to the EU for PGI certification is incomplete, the MMPPA hopes that the use of the place name association will enable its members to resist competition from “pretenders” intent on taking advantage of the traditional name to market an arguably inferior product.

Conclusion

In recent years the British food industry has begun to market folk products more widely, based on a production line basis, and sold nationally by chain stores throughout Britain and the rest of the world. However, this new system of production has necessitated the adulteration of the folk recipes, partly to simplify the production process, and partly to enable the food product to be marketed on a wider geographical basis while retaining its freshness. Fortunately for products such as Stilton cheese and Melton Mowbray Pork Pies, legislation now exists which can protect a “place named” product as a kind of intellectual property of the area of origin (Moran, 1993a). Controls over the production of foods from particular named locations can be more or less stringent depending upon the methods of production and the ingredients used. However, quality characteristics instilled in the image of a traditional product over, in some cases, many centuries can be used to protect the production of traditional foods, and restrict this production to the area of origin of the food. In addition, the uniqueness of the product can be used

as a marketing tool in order to guarantee the success of each enterprise. At the same time these actions widen the opportunities open to individuals, and enable them to promote local communities beyond the designated regions. Thus such actions can be seen as one means of giving a unique expression to one facet of popular culture, while retaining the localism and individuality inherent in folk culture, and thereby gaining the best of both worlds.

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End Notes

¹.Both Blue Stilton and White Stilton are produced. The story of each is quite similar. Only Blue Stilton is referred to in this discussion as it is the variety that is best known, and with which the name “Stilton” is most closely associated.

².The Syston to Peterborough railway (via Melton Mowbray) opened in 1847. Its terminus was in London.

³.Other challenges included a move away from meat consumption generally, and a well-founded belief that a MMPP, high (for instance) in fat did not qualify as a health food! Sales are certainly stronger for males than females for this reason.

⁴.An attempt had been made in the 1880s to copyright the name “Melton Mowbray Pork Pie”. This failed, however, when the manufacturers were not allowed to copyright the name of the town (Hickman, 1997:18). Another company was allowed to register the name Belvoir Pork Pie, named after the Vale of Belvoir, in the late 1800s (Hickman,104).