

second opinion

Decimating? Or benefiting?

Kevin Hawkins



Do the costs of food store development in town centres outweigh the benefits? It's time we moved on from the dogmatic, polarised positions that have underpinned this debate over the past 20 years. The only way to do that is to gather hard evidence at local level, to which the Portas review regrettably contributed nothing.

Fortunately ongoing work by a team at Southampton University is throwing valuable light on local dynamics. Researchers investigated the impact of large corporate food stores on central and edge-of-centre sites in four market towns and four district centres between 2007 and 2009. They then looked at the impact of small store development in five small towns in 2010/11.

They found these developments had had a positive impact

on those centres, for example by retaining retail spending that might otherwise have been lost, spreading this retained spending to existing retailers and services through linked shopping trips, and anchoring the existing retail structure through the downturn.

They also found the new stores were strongly welcomed by local

“The stores were strongly welcomed and not widely seen as a threat”

shoppers and not widely seen as a threat by existing traders. Nor had the retail diversity of these centres suffered.

Lest these results should be dismissed as aberrant, researchers at Stirling University have investigated the impact of a Tesco superstore in Shettleston, a deprived area of Glasgow

showing signs of retail deterioration prior to Tesco's arrival in 2003. Far from devastating the local structure, this development has stabilised it and reinforced localness.

Other local studies may well come up with different conclusions. If and when they do, they will add to our understanding of local dynamics and tell us more about why some town centres are more resilient than others. Impact assessments, with their limitations, have their part to play, but there is no substitute for rigorous, ex post facto analysis.

Did the supermarket salesmen deliver on their promises? Or were the local traders decimated? Above all, what are the implications for policy? As the American wit Josh Billings observed: “The trouble with people is not that they don't know, but that they know so much that ain't so.” ●

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CRITICAL EYE

Charlie Wright



We hold this truth to be self-evident: all olives are created equal. So it was weird hearing a man with a thick Afrikaans accent talk about separating the blacks from the greens.

Food Unwrapped (Channel 4, Monday, 8.30pm) promised “to ask the questions food producers aren't expecting” – maybe because they're too banal. Host Matt Tebbutt was an inoffensive everyman. But reporter Kate – bed-head hair and dressed like she'd been dragged backwards through a retro '80s hedgerow – took the naïf style of questioning to dizzy new depths, like a day-old kitten gaffer-taped to a mic. Her ruse of acting like a total idiot at all times revealed that black olives are really green olives treated to look black. Who knew?

Better was the piece on what goes into (and back out of) our beer: seaweed, fish collagen and possibly bits of the Belgrano. It's well-timed. Lager volumes are collapsing; abvs tumbling like a drunkard down a flight of stairs. Booze-hounds are in thrall to craft beers like Dalai Lager's Sweaty Yeti and Einstein's Atomic Enema.

Tebbutt failed to grasp that ingredients and processes are different but, worse, failed to ask the key question: shouldn't we be saving our precious fish collagen to inject in the faces of X Factor finalists?

Now there are almost as many micro-breweries as there are pubs left, remember that hidden extras have long been part of beer making. After all, Dad's home-brew was never the same without his two secret ingredients – paint-thinner, and love. But mostly the first one.

higgins

