

The New Geography of Food and Agriculture in New Zealand

Geographers who study agriculture and food are using several new approaches to understand the way the restructuring of international trade, the activities of transnational corporations, and rapid shifts in government policies are affecting agriculture and the rural landscape in different countries. For example, agriculture has been transformed through horizontal integration in which smaller enterprises are merged to create larger units (for example, when adjacent farms are consolidated into one large landholding, resulting in the disappearance of small family-run farms) and through vertical integration, in which a single firm takes control of several stages in the production process (when a company owns the fertilizer and seed companies as well as the food-processing plant and supermarkets). The international corporation ConAgra, which owns grain companies, feedlots, meatprocessing, and wholesale distribution facilities is an agribusiness that organizes food production from the manufacturing of chemical inputs and the genetic manipulation of animal breeds or crop varieties to the processing, retailing, and consumption of the agricultural product.

Geographers such as Richard Le Heron and Guy Robinson have written extensively about how New Zealand agriculture has changed in response to the restructuring of the global food system. They document how New Zealand's agricultural system evolved during the nineteenth century with an orientation to exports of wool and lamb based on a pastoral landscape and a guaranteed market in the core economy of the United Kingdom. After World War II a second regime developed that included dairy cows on small farms and processing of products such as butter for export using refrigerated shipping. By the mid-twentieth century the New Zealand government was heavily involved in the agricultural system through "marketing

boards" that mediated farmers' relationship with international markets through quality controls, price supports, and marketing.

In the 1970s the shock of the oil crisis (increasing the cost of agricultural inputs) and the loss of the imperial preference market when Britain joined the European Community resulted in further state support for producers, with price supports, incentives, and subsidies for inputs such as fertilizers providing more than a third of farm revenues. However, even these institutional supports could not fully buffer farmers against the increasing cost of inputs and loss of markets for the staples of wool, meat, and dairy, and some farmers began to diversify into nontraditional exports, such as venison, produced on deer farms, and fruit such as kiwi and Asian pears, responding to a new global food regime of specialty foods and the export of fruit and vegetables (Figure 8.H and Figure 8.I).

A dramatic change in agricultural policies in 1984 abruptly removed most price supports, trade protections, and farm subsidies, and required farms to pay for extension services, water, and quality inspections. Farm income fell by up to half, debt increased, 10 percent of farms were sold, herds were significantly reduced, and 10,000 farmers protested in front of Parliament. New Zealand agriculture was thrown into a global free market and the full impact of what has been called the "international farm crisis," while most other developed countries, including the United States, Canada, and those in Europe, maintained considerable state regulation and support for their agricultural systems. Although New Zealand farmers coped by adjusting herd sizes and changing crop mixes, some went out of business and their properties were horizontally integrated into larger farms. But New Zealand was also one of the first countries to adopt certification for organic agricultural products, and there is a thriving domestic market for

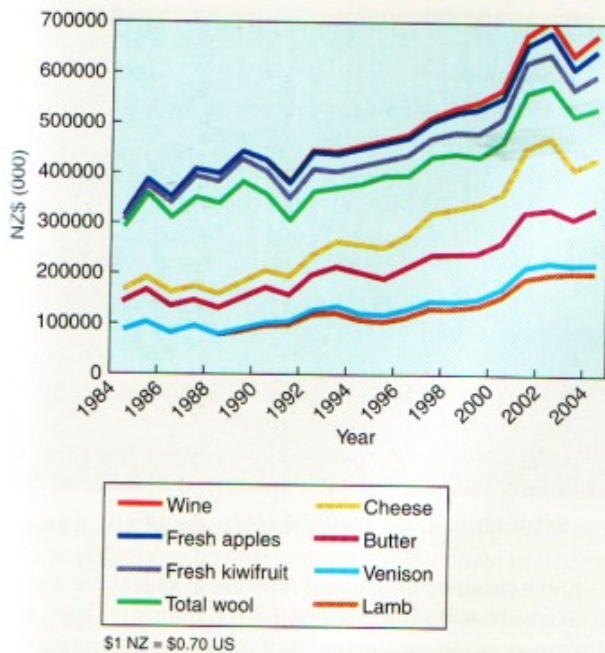


Figure 8.H New Zealand agricultural production The structure of New Zealand agricultural exports has changed in response to the restructuring of global agricultural trade and demand. Although the traditional exports of lamb meat and butter have remained high, wool exports have fallen. Exports of nontraditional crops such as kiwi, berries, avocados, wine, and venison have increased considerably.

sustainably grown foods. Transnational agribusiness firms, such as H.J. Heinz, purchased New Zealand agricultural processing enterprises with the goal of supplying growing Asian markets. Michael Moore, the New Zealander who had spearheaded his country's plunge into the free market as minister of trade, became the head of the World Trade Organization, charged with reducing barriers to trade worldwide.

Many geographers are reexamining agriculture in the context of global restructuring and changing government policies and contributing important insights into the ways in which the new international geogra-



Figure 8.I Kiwi production These kiwi orchards on the North Island of New Zealand are surrounded by lines of trees that protect the delicate fruit from strong winds.

phy of food and agriculture is changing the economy and environments of countries such as New Zealand. The geographic perspective allows us to link international trade, regulation, and corporations to the decisions of national and local governments and to the impacts on and responses of agricultural regions, communities, and farm families.

