Local food and alternative food networks: a communication perspective

Gianluca Brunori
Local food and alternative food networks: a communication perspective

Gianluca Brunori

Introduction

1 In recent years the link between quality and locality has become evident to both academics and practitioners working in the food sector. In an intensively quoted introduction to a special issue on the Journal of Rural Studies, Goodman (2003) related the 'quality turn' that has occurred in the food sector in the last years to three concepts: trust, embeddedness and place. These concepts represent the basic organising principles of 'alternative agro-food networks' that have been developed to put into practice ethical and political food concerns. As stated by Lang and Heasman (2004), food quality today is a battleground of for competing paradigms, each of them advocating specific food and production consumption norms and structuring specific organisational patterns in the food system. In this respect local food plays a particular role compared to quality food.

2 In this article, we propose to consider the 'local turn' in light of this 'quality turn'. Our approach is based on the assumption that quality is mainly related to the creation and exchange of meanings, and therefore to communication processes. Communication is also key to the process of qualification, a concept introduced by Callon and others (2002) to explain the construction of quality as related to the network-building activity of a variety of actors from different spheres such as production, consumption and commerce.

3 In line with this approach, food production relocalization strategies in western countries are interpreted, according to the methodologies suggested by Dixon (1997), Goodman and Dupuis (2002), Guthman (2002) and others, taking into account the changes in the meanings attached to food by producers, consumers and other stakeholders in the agri-food system. The article sets out to develop a framework based on the 'transformational' power of local food, in a bid to interpret, and support the
active building of, food relocalization strategies. The article starts by illustrating a
negotiated model for the analysis of food quality, aimed at interpreting changes in the
food system that come about as food acquires new meaning. This model is also
discussed with reference to the theory of qualification process, as proposed by Callon et
others (2002).

The model is then applied to an analysis of food relocalization strategies. In this
respect, we will discuss the development of Slow Food, a food movement born in Italy
about 20 years ago that aims to replace the dominant food culture by a new and
different alternative. In recent years, Slow Food has expanded worldwide becoming an
authoritative source of ideas and opinions on eating, food quality and agriculture and
spearheading a wide variety of food relocalization initiatives. The article concludes
with a discussion of the framework’s possibilities and limitations.

Quality, meanings of food and change in the food system

In food marketing literature, approaches to quality range from purely ‘objective’
approaches, (meaning quality that is defined by a set of measurable characteristics) to
purely ‘subjective’ approaches (meaning quality that is determined by consumers'
attitudes and behaviour). Most of these approaches, however, recognise that a) quality
is the result of the interplay between product characteristics, producers and
consumers; b) there is a gap between ‘perceived quality’ and ‘measurable quality’; c)
this gap provides marketing strategies with the room for manoeuvre.

However, the weight attributed to ‘measurable’ aspects and to non-measurable aspects
can vary considerably. In this respect, what we may call ‘technological approaches’
focus on those technical characteristics of a product that give functional benefits to the
consumer, and on a firm’s capacity to detect and reproduce those characteristics.
Vaclavik et al. (2003) distinguish between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ quality, the first
being related to individual differences in response to the physical characteristics of
food (such as appearance, texture, and flavour), the second to nutritional and bacterial
qualities. Technological approaches tend, albeit with some difficulty, to ‘objectify'
quality by developing sensorial methods of analysis and identifying the physical
elements that contribute to appreciation or dislike.

Conventional marketing approaches shift their emphasis to consumer needs. Companies
using this approach aim to identify and build upon them unfulfilled
consumer needs so as to create differentiated products. To do this, conventional
marketing takes into account consumer decision-making processes, and introduces the
concept of ‘perceived quality’. This is somewhat different from ‘subjective’ quality, as it
relates not to the response to physical stimuli, but to the image, or preconceived
opinion consumers have of a given product. Blind testing, for example, shows that
consumer responses vary depending on the information provided about a given the
product (whether known or unknown, etc.). So-called credence characteristics are
particularly important cues that influence consumer choice by creating an association
between the product and a value system'. This in turn makes way for ‘manipulative’
approaches to quality, focusing on a company’s power to influence perceived quality.
Another version is more biased towards ‘understanding’, based on a policy that is
committed to satisfying consumer needs. In conventional marketing, however,
producers are ‘neutral’ with respect to consumer needs and values: these can only be
evaluated by the company in terms of their potential profitability.
Post-modern marketing approaches acknowledge that the change brought about by the shift to a post-productive era implies a complete rethink of conventional marketing approaches. In particular, it emphasizes the fact that consumers increasingly define their (unstable) individual identities by belonging to networks, each one providing them with symbolic resources and helping to recombine them. Post-modern marketing relates to the process of individualisation / reflexive construction of social links by consumers. Consumption, in this respect, is not only aimed at satisfying functional needs, but increasingly at satisfying needs that relate to the sphere of social and political relations. Food in general has a strong 'link-value': meals are traditionally a celebration of household unity or an aid to conviviality. Whereas the modernisation of the agro-food sector tends to individualise food consumption, the 'quality' turn shows a strong tendency to re-embed food into social networks. Lee (2000), for example, recommends an 'economy of regard', in the form of a mutual exchange of knowledge and status, which may displace narrow economic relationships.

Post-modern marketing acknowledges that the information flow that characterizes the relationship between the world of production and the world of consumption is base on a bi-directional information flow. Conventional marketing approaches products are conceived and adapted after analysing explicit or induced consumer needs but according to post-modern marketing, the construction of quality is the result of the dialogue between the world of production and the world of consumption.

Lassaut and Sylvander (1997), drawing on a comparison between two types of bread in France, find that craftsmen bakers explain to consumers why hand-crafted bread tastes as it does, so playing an education role vis-à-vis consumers – what the authors refer to as 'cognitive marketing'. The business sector is rich with examples (the most famous being Ben and Jerry’s and the Body shop) of producers with a 'vision' (and therefore, strong convictions) who succeed in the market by engaging with consumers.

On a more general level, the cognitive aspect counts as a major factor in the organisational design of Alternative Agro-food networks (AAFNs) (Goodman, 2003). Communication between producers and consumers offers economic advantages related to improved price management and more efficient added value distribution channels. Besides that, however, it also posits learning as a component of the product itself.

Giving alternative meanings to food: the Slow Food formula

Slow food is an example of this process of constructing of alternative meanings for quality. From the outset, the Slow Food Movement has been openly committed to challenging conventional attitudes to food quality and, ultimately, changing the production and distribution of food. Its name (and snail logo, symbol of slowness) stands for a specific form of quality, rejecting the standardisation and delocalisation represented by fast food, in favour of a different lifestyle based on a different use of time.

In order to construct that meaning, Slow Food developed a narrative explaining how specific local traditions and natural resources once led to an abundant variety of food. Linking quality with diversity, Slow Food accuses modernisation – particularly industrialisation, food hygiene rules and concentrated retail development - of having marginalised traditional food. To reverse this trend, Slow Food sets out to show consumers that different foods do exist, and that local food is really quite unlike industrially-made food. Organoleptic quality, therefore, is of the utmost importance if consumers are to recognise this diversity. At the same time, Slow Food works on
educating taste’ in the firm belief that consumers must recover their powers of
discernment in order to appreciate food quality to the full.

Slow food initiatives are based on what we could call ‘the Slow Food formula’. This is
based on the capacity of an organisation and its representatives, normally volunteers,
to act as ‘integrators’ between producers, local administrations, informed consumers
and specialised outlets, and to link local networks to broader networks. Each of the
Slow Food Presidia has its own particular history, but most have developed as follows
way:

- A local Slow Food group individuates a local product (or contacts a local producer group)
  with added-value potential;
- Working together with producers, Slow Food then embarks on a value-adding project (for
  example, to restore a local breed, deal with problems related to hygiene rules, or improve
  organoleptic characteristics), while also putting the local group in touch with local
  institutions, the mass media, experts and specialised outlets within the Slow Food network;
- To qualify as a Slow Food Presidium, producers must also re-qualify their product,
  specifying its quality characteristics and their particular code of practice;
- Slow Food and producers work together to exhibit their product at trade fairs, particularly
  the Salone del Gusto (Taste fair), a major event held in Torino every two years;
- Pin the participation to Salone del Gusto provides producers with useful contacts, also
  developing their sense of self-esteem through interaction with visitors and other Presidium
  producers and motivating them to continue with the project.
- The reputation gained by products within the Slow Food network paves the way for relevant
  localization strategies by intensifying participation in farmers’ markets, trade fairs and on
  farm selling activities.
- Slow Food asks producers to conform to a clearly defined code of practice, but it, itself, is
  not a commercial label: its mission is neither to sell nor to certify products, but to raise
  consumer awareness of the value of local products. This does, however, depend on some
  form of quality control, as the communicative impact of Presidium status is so strong that
  price can be much higher than non-Presasidia products.

Today there are some 200 national Italian Presidia and 75 international Presidia. All of
them participated in the 2006 Salone del Gusto fair, attended by 140,000 visitors in five
days. Indeed, faced with an ever-increasing drive to register local products as Presidia,
Slow Food decided to curb growth, aware that a proliferation of registered products
would be unmanageable in terms of communication and quality control.

In another article (Brunori, 2006), we illustrated how Slow Food provides local networks
with symbolic capital, helping them to establish a reputation with external consumers
so as to allow their products to make the shift from ‘local products’ to ‘locality
products’.

Another outstanding feature of Slow Food is its capacity to ‘shift the boundaries’ for
action, therebying the standardisation to avoid or trivialisation of meanings. The
growing awareness of Presidia has allowed, Slow Food to launch its slogan ‘Good, Clean
and Fair’ campaign extending its original remit to cover, introducing such issues as the
conservation of biodiversity and social justice, mainly in terms of organoleptic quality.
Slow Food also organises the Terra Madre (mother earth) exhibition, a parallel event to
Salone del Gusto that attracts some 5000 selected producers, chefs, journalists and food
activists, and aims to focus attention on food-related themes in plenary and parallel
sessions.
A semiotic model of quality construction processes

An increasing number of food studies pay attention to the meanings attached to food. Dixon (1997) adapts the commodity chain model to study the flow of meanings along the food chain. She takes into consideration a new set of actors – those we could call symbolic producers and processors – whose role is related to the creation and flow of meanings.

Goodman and DuPuis (2002) favour a symmetrical analysis of production-consumption relationships, and put forward the concepts of commodity fetishism and totemism as two ways of explaining the symbolic relationship between production and consumption. Fetishism means to ascribe value to goods without being aware of the totality of which those goods form part. For example, if I were aware of how some food products were made, of I would not choose them for ethical, political or health reasons. Totemism occurs when food becomes a symbol of group identities. (Italians identify themselves, and are identified abroad, as spaghetti eaters.)

The implication of their analysis is that consumers can be identified as agents of change through their food choices, and that the direction of change depends on what consumers know about food.

The importance of meanings in the theories of food quality argues for the use of semiotic theories. In the Peirce model, adapted by Ogden and Richard, (as reported by Fiske 1982), meanings are created through a process of signification involving signs, referent (meaning ‘the external reality’), and reference (meaning the ‘mental representation’ of external reality). The referent manifests itself through signals, which are the information generated by the referent and affecting the subject’s sensorial system: sounds, flavours, colours, shapes, pain, etc. The mental image of the referent is represented through symbols, which are the signs that ‘stand for’ the reference by convention, agreement, or rule.

This model is applied below to study the process of construction of food quality. In this case, food is the referent, quality is the reference, sensorial aspects are signals and symbols are name, logo, brand and all quality descriptors. According to this model, quality is the outcome of an interaction between actors, food and entities. It has meaning in the mind of a consumer, being a mental representation of the characteristics of particular goods. This meaning is confirmed or challenged in the act of consuming. In fact, judgement is an act of decoding the information that is available through appropriate codes. A consumer can judge the quality of a wine from such signals as flavour, colour, etc. and from other details including information (the name of the wine, its place of origin, personal knowledge of the producer, etc). All those consumers who lack the necessary codes with which to judge the quality of goods must rely on expert opinion and expert systems. A wine’s quality characteristics can be detected through analytical testing (for example, alcohol/acid content) or expert sensory analysis, and the results of these tests can be communicated to consumers through appropriate symbols.

Taste may be regarded as a set of codes that are possessed by consumers and with which they are able to turn available information into quality judgements.

According to Bourdieu (1979), taste is influenced by two elements: the first derives from the consumption norms particular to a given social group; and the second derives from accumulated individual experience.
25 Guthman (2002) identifies taste as the ‘gatekeeper of consumption’, ‘the site where meanings are attributed to and derived from food’ (p. 299), and explores ways in which taste articulates production and consumption. She lists a) reflexive taste, as opposed to routine taste, meaning the process of making informed choices based on the consequences of consumption on the body or on the external environment; b) discerning taste, meaning the taste that identifies, and differentiates specific social, groups; c) mediating taste, based on rules of behaviour when there are conflicting concerns, for example gluttony and health, or hunger and diet, and d) legitimizing taste, which embodies norms of behaviour that are appropriate within specific consumption contexts or social groups.

26 Table 1 presents a comparison of conventional and Slow Food approaches based on the semiotic model. Here, Slow Food builds an alternative signification system based on local hand-crafted food (the referent), diversity and organoleptic quality (signals), a different set of food identifiers (symbols), and the different meaning derived from these (reference) based on food as pleasure, social relationships and conviviality.

Table 1. A comparative analysis between conventional and Slow food approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Conventional</th>
<th>Slow food</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referent</td>
<td>Industrial food</td>
<td>Local, hand-crafted food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Signals</td>
<td>Standard organoleptic quality based on few parameters (salt, fat, sugar) and on exterior parameters (size, colour, aesthetics)</td>
<td>Diversity as a key to quality. Strong emphasis on organoleptic parameters and on the need to teach sensory skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbol</td>
<td>Industrial brand</td>
<td>Slow food name, slow food logo, name of the place of production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>Food as routine consumption; short term satisfaction</td>
<td>Food as pleasure, social link, conviviality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The politics of quality

27 Such a representation of the process of quality construction helps us to understand why and how certain quality conventions are consolidated in specific contexts and how they evolve. In fact, people behave according to the meanings they give to things, and it is the capacity to control how meanings are created that allows one person to affect another’s behaviour.

28 Using the model illustrated above can consider the construction of quality in a given context as the result of a range of politics played in several fields. These politics can be related to the following aspects:

- Production and/or the control over production of symbols (politics of information)
- Detection and interpretation of signals (politics of science and technology)
- Relationship between referent and meaning (politics of knowledge)
- Relationship between symbols and meanings (politics of communication)
- Relationship between signals and meanings (politics of standards and of innovation)
Such an approach is adopted by Nestle (2002) which reconstructs the ‘food pyramid’ story and the struggle to inform consumers of nutritionally correct norms of consumption, or the evolution of so called ‘health claims’. One outstanding example of the politics of quality in the local food context relates to the use of raw milk in cheese production in Italy. As a result of EU hygiene rules, in the 1980s Italian health authorities began to forbid the production of raw milk cheese, a traditional product found in many Italian communities. In other words, ‘raw milk’ was officially identified as a ‘safety risk’ and as a result became a marker of ‘bad quality’.

In 2000 Slow Food launched a Manifesto ‘in defence of raw milk’, stating that raw milk cheese is ‘an art and a lifestyle’, and that to ban it would be a mistake because sterilisation alters organoleptic characteristics and destroys important gastronomic traditions. As part of its campaign, Slow food mobilised experts in several fields, encouraging researchers to come up with safety conditions for raw milk. Finally, by giving a new interpretation to the rules applied by national authorities, the campaign succeeded in re-instating raw milk on the condition that certain precautionary rules were followed. According to the semiotic model above, the presence of Slow Food as an alternative producer of symbols (politics of information) opens up an alternative channel of communication about food. This makes it possible to communicate with consumers and citizens about the link between raw milk, tradition, food safety and organoleptic quality, so putting pressure on legislative and health authorities to change their position. As part of its campaign, Slow Food mobilised producers, experts in sensory quality, researchers and consumers, in a bid to change hygiene rules and their interpretation by national authorities.

The process of qualification

Callon et al. (2002) would interpret this action as a process aimed at ‘detaching’ consumers from a socio-technical actor-network and ‘reattaching’ them to another one. To explain this process, Callon et al developed a theory of ‘qualification’ (see also Allaire 2004).

The basis of this theory is the distinction between goods and products. This distinction is evidenced by the fact that, even in industrial production, no two goods are ever identical even though they may share the same name - and be regarded by consumers as the same product. A consumer tasting a Parmigiano Reggiano cut from different wheels might detect differences in colour, flavour, taste and texture, but he or she would still recognise it as Parmigiano Reggiano.

In order to stabilise the characteristics of a product into a desired set, producers need to coordinate a network of managers, engineers, workers, raw material, machines analytical tools and data around a common goal. For example, if raw material is not accurately selected, or if machines are not properly cleaned and well maintained, the resulting goods may noticeably differ from those produced on another occasion.
Goods therefore possess a set of characteristics that are fixed at a given moment in the production process. A product, on the other hand, is set of rules that define the variety of goods that can be produced under the same name, as well as the socio-technical system and the operations needed to produce those goods.

This distinction allows us to understand how the production process can be deliberately fine-tuned to adapt the quality (that is, the set of characteristics) of the product to suit changing consumer needs (or defined economic goals, or hygienic or environmental standards).

The qualification theory posits another process that helps to explain how needs and tastes are generated. Goods, according to Appadurai (1988), live a social life, and may therefore undergo several transformations in time and in space. They enter into the consumer world, so that they may be transported, stored or consumed, whether by individuals, groups, etc. The shape of the consumer world, which is another actor-network (composed of transportation tools, storage, consumer groups, etc.), helps to determine consumer judgement and need and the hierarchy of characteristics that define quality.

Product quality, therefore, is the outcome of the interaction between the actors, entities and symbols involved in production, distribution and consumption. The process of qualification brings a gradual ‘objectification’ of a set of quality characteristics, obtained by consolidating actor-networks around agreed meanings that relate to the product.

A qualification network can break down under the effect of external forces (for example, events that put consolidated beliefs into crisis and turn consumers towards new beliefs) or internal drives (consumer weariness, lack of innovation, erosion of quality). When consumers turn to vegetarianism, they detach themselves from networks centred on animal production and processing and attach instead to networks that provide them with alternative and the necessary knowledge and cooking expertise to enjoy them. In the 1990s for example, Mad Cow Disease proved a turning point in beef consumption, driving many consumers towards vegetarianism or the too exclusive consumption of organic beef.

Local food as a force for change in the food system

What is the relevance of local food to all this? Our point of departure is that local food conveys strong meanings with the potential to detach consumers from conventional food networks and attach them to alternative food networks. Table 2 shows some of the meanings that may be attributed to local food, classified in five categories: functional, ecological, aesthetic, ethical, political.
Local food, therefore, can be key to a strategy aimed at shifting the balance of power in the food system through 'relocalization'. Relocalization strategies are based on building production-consumption networks around specific meanings and objectives. Since different actors have different interests and objectives, the success of such strategies depends on its capacity to 'align' actors (Latour, 1987) along shared axes of meaning as the condition to coordinate their action.

In fact, recent years have seen a blossoming of initiatives based on local food. We may distinguish between three forms of relocalization: a) symbolic b) physical and c) relational.

**Symbolic relocalization** relies, in the first instance, on providing an opportunity for consumers to become aware of the origin of the product or its main ingredients. Food traceability, for instance, was introduced so as to increase the more transparency of the food industry following repeated food crises. As such, it has given producers an opportunity to create a link between origin and safety in the mind of the consumer. It is at this level that Italian main farmers' organisations play on the politics of information (representing a legitimate alternative source of information on food to commercial players). They claim that, as a result of existing regulations, many of food products are misleadingly sold as ‘made in Italy’ even though most of the ingredients, or even the finished product, originate from abroad.

Another aspect of symbolic delocalization is the development of symbolic capital around a food product. In this case, the name of the product, its place of origin, brand and even its material signifiers and narratives contribute to the product reputation and trustworthiness, strengthening consumer attachment to local food networks. Through their campaigns Italian farming associations put forward criteria that link the symbol – Italian - to meaning - good quality. A similar strategy is the Godt Norsk initiative described by Nygard and Storstad (1998) whereby Norsk is associated with less risky food in a globalising context. Generally speaking, most local food strategies are based on the claim that, when properly managed, the cultural traditions and natural characteristics of the place of origin, impart particular qualities to a product.

**Physical relocalization** implies a reconfiguring of sourcing patterns and the localization of processing plants. The growth of consumer demand for origin-linked products is encouraging producers to locate or relocate segments of the production process within delimited production areas. For example, when Lardo di Colonnata

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional</th>
<th>Health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecological</td>
<td>Food miles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biodiversity and landscape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic</td>
<td>Diversity vs standardisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Distinction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical</td>
<td>Authenticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity and solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>To change the balance of power in the food chain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>To orient production and consumption patterns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Food meanings
became a PGI\textsuperscript{17} several medium size pork-processing units purchased buildings in Colonnata so as to have the possibility of labelling their own bacon as a PGI.

The evolution of PDO\textsuperscript{18} and PGI shows that physical relocalization does not stop once recognition is obtained. After the link between place and product has become established, producers search the area for endogenous resources that might be mobilised to qualify and differentiate the product. In the case of Italian PDOs and PGIs for instance, place of origin was initially associated with just one segment of the production process, namely processing or even packing. Today, however, we are seeing qualification processes that follow trajectories based on input sourcing within a more contained area, replacing generic raw inputs with inputs from local breeds and varieties and relocating processing plants within the delimited area (see Belletti et al. 2006). In other words, PDO producer strategies are turning away from an instrumental use of symbols towards relocalization strategies to more consistent with the symbolic relocalization illustrated above. Physical relocalization is further stimulated by movements like Food Miles, which stresses the environmental costs of food globalization. Distributors may also implement local sourcing strategies. Vorley et al. (2006) present a comparative study showing two initiatives undertaken by retailing cooperatives (one in Italy and the other in the UK) aimed at relocalizing part of their sourcing; and Schaer et al. (2006) present a case study of a German supermarket chain that is developing a spin-off based on a local identity.

Finally, there is a relational relocalization. Symbolic and physical relocalization imply a reconfiguring of sourcing/production/consumption, and therefore of qualification processes. Relational relocalization is supported by a variety of ‘bottom-up’ marketing initiatives, such as direct selling, farmers’ markets, box schemes and consumers’ groups\textsuperscript{19}. Other initiatives, like wine routes (Brunori and Rossi 2000) stimulate both direct selling, through coordinated farmer selling activities, and tourism.

On the producer side, an agglomeration of producers in a given area contributes to the development of agricultural districts\textsuperscript{20}. This is characterised by the growth of local networks, intensifying the information flows that lie at the heart of learning and innovation. On the consumer side, direct links between consumers and producers lead to a better understanding of the consumer perspective and more active cognitive marketing. Thanks to symbolic relocalization, distance marketing can also be based on direct links, by means of information technologies and logistic services. Relational relocalization implies a reconfiguring of the membership of the processes of qualification. Various factors may serve to determine whether or not an actor is included in the qualification process. These include not only the boundaries of the production area itself, but also production specifications, quantitative thresholds (as in the case of wine), allowable inputs, and marketing techniques.

Symbolic, physical and relational forms of relocalization are strictly interrelated, but because they can be combined in different ways they in turn activate different relocation strategies.

Given the diversity of meanings that can be attached to local food, we need to look in depth at the dimensions of local food and their possible outcome. One important distinction relates to local vs locality food, introduced by the ‘Curry report’ in the UK (DEFRA 2002)\textsuperscript{21}. The distinction between local and locality food can be based on the symbolic/relational/physical criteria given above.
Local food is the expression of a local community, consisting of consumers and producers alike. Local food is mainly circulated through (short distance) traditional circuits, and is principally chosen because it forms part of ordinary food habits. A product’s awareness of quality characteristics and ways of preparing and consuming it, are part of ‘local knowledge’, produced and reproduced within the community. Consumers are personally acquainted with the producers who form part of the same community, and trust between producers and consumers is generated through personal knowledge, as free riders are sanctioned principally by moral sanctions such as blame and loss of reputation. There are few opportunities to compare local with non-local food, and products coming from outside the community may be perceived with suspicion as they conflict with local food habits.

Locality food is the result of a separation between the world of production and the world of consumption. Consumers and producers neither belong to the same community nor, in most cases, are they personally acquainted. Consumption may be far removed from production, and stems from a reflexive choice. Consumers choose locality products because they perceive them as coming from a certain place and possessing well defined and differentiated characteristics. In order to make that choice, they need to develop the capacity to distinguish between products. As long as the worlds of consumption and production are separated, product quality must be guaranteed by formalised quality systems or by appropriate commercial patterns that allow the identification and communication of quality characteristics.

A third category, localist food, is not related to a traditional food habit, but may be deliberately chosen from among a set of products by consumers living in the same place. The reasons for this choice are mainly related to the need to reconstruct local identities through local food systems. In other words, the difference between local and localist food is related to the reflexivity of consumption - which is low in the first case and much higher in the second - and to the geographical context of consumption. Local food is produced and consumed locally whereas locality food is produced locally and consumed globally for distinctive qualities that are associated with its place of origin.

Table 3: Local, locality and localist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Local</th>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>Localist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Consumers and producers belong to the same place. Consumer choices and producer strategies are based on routines</td>
<td>While the worlds of production tend to concentrate in one place, worlds of consumption may be far removed.</td>
<td>Consumers and producers belong to the same place.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Symbolic Consumers are aware of where the product comes from because they are personally acquainted with producers or distributors. Product quality is mainly associated with freshness or absence of risk. Consumers are assured of the origin (and quality) of the product by specific labels and insurance systems. Product quality is mainly associated with ‘excellence’ linked to the place. Consumers deliberately choose local producers and local products. Product quality is associated with environmental factors, safety and freshness, but also with identity concerns.

Relational Actor-networks are shaped by belonging to the same community. Product actor-networks can be shaped by appropriate relocalization strategies. Consumers and producers actively build or rebuild communities.

What emerges from this classification is the need to distinguish between relocalization strategies, even though these can be synergistic. Strategies based on local food mainly suit to contexts where the modernisation of the food system is at a very early stage, as in rural areas of the developing world or in western Europe. In this case, the strategy’s objective may be to guarantee that the local community controls its own food production. Strategies based on locality food are essentially rent-seeking as higher production costs lead to higher quality and therefore to premium prices. Safeguarding revenue levels depends on a strict (inverse) relationship between quality and quantity. The Italian market provides several examples of products made by particular production or processing methods that significantly reduce the available volume of production, so giving producers a very high premium price. One example among many is Zolfino, a local variety of bean cultivated in the mountains of southeast Tuscany. The bean’s characteristics are quite unlike those of other beans, being smaller, with very thin skin and a pronounced taste. Nowadays Zolfino beans are mainly marketed through direct selling channels for some ten times the price of ordinary beans.

For localist food strategies, the key is relational relocalization. In fact, a localist strategy cannot rely upon revenue-seeking approaches, as a) many locality foods are ‘exceptional’ rather than ‘ordinary’ since they defy the canons of healthy eating (for example wine, meats with high level of fats, sweets, etc) and b) local consumers are not wealthy enough to afford a daily diet of top level quality products. Therefore, rather than aiming for premium prices, producers should pursue value-adding strategies based on internalising operations which in the past were externalised (such as the example production of inputs), short supply chains on-farm, processing, shared logistical operations (as in the case of many purchasing groups) and replacing certification with personal trust (thereby saving on certification costs).

Conclusions and research agenda

This article suggests a theoretical framework for the analysis of quality construction and power distribution processes by the actors involved. The article highlights the importance of communication processes, as well as the need to control the flow of communication and the construction of meanings so as to stabilise the position of local...
food within the food system. At the same time, the article concurs with the concept of qualification defined by Callon et al. (2002), seeing it as a way of providing producers and consumers alike with an unbiased view of the food system, and suggesting how to link changes in the food system to changes in rural areas. With specific reference to local food, the article reveals the distinctions between local, locality and localist food in terms of stakeholders, communication processes and marketing strategies.

56 What emerges from the above is the need to address both theory and empirical research on the critical aspects of food networks where meanings are either consolidated or changed. In this respect, there is evidence that change in the food system depends on the capacity of food network actors to control the creation of meaning in relevant contexts by playing within different fields such as information, standards, communication, science. Controlling the creation of meaning is key to building working food networks and removing the barriers (regulatory, infrastructural, ethical) that constrain their development.

57 Food movements like Slow Food have demonstrably established themselves as players in all of these fields. The case study outlined here is, based on years of empirical fieldwork by the author and evidences some of the key elements of food relocalization strategies. An analysis of those strategies reveals a striking link, between the local (micro) networks – composed of producers, local leaders and institutions - and global (macro) networks, built by Slow Food through major national and international events and intensive communication activities.

58 Our findings suggest that considerable research is needed to study actors who play an indirect role in food marketing – those outside the field of operation itself and mainly concerned within communication flows, such as media, food movements, standard regulations, control systems etc. At the same time, researchers should aim to analyse the process of meaning creation in food production, consumption and marketing, also evaluating how operations vary with changes in meaning. In the author's opinion, actor-network analysis and discourse analysis methodologies represent the most promising tools with which to create a common methodology; the paper outlines how these methodologies might be implemented. Clearly, a strong interdisciplinary approach is required. Whatever the starting point and purpose of research (marketing, economics, sociology or anthropology) those responsible should be aware of its implications for other disciplines, redefining their categories as necessary.

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


*Anthropology of food, S2 | March 2007*


DUFFY N., HOOPER J., 2003, Passion branding. Harnessing the power of emotion to build strong brands. Chichester, John Wiley and Sons


FISKE J., 1982, Introduction to communication studies. London: Routledge,


GOODMAN D. AND E.M. DUPUIS, 2002, “Knowing food and growing food: beyond the production/consumption debate in the sociology of agriculture”. Sociologia ruralis 42-1, pp. 6-23


THE ECONOMIST, 2006, “Voting with trolley”, *The Economist*, December 9th,


APPENDIXES

Figure 1. A semiotic theoretical model

Figure 2. The process of qualification

NOTES

1. see also Marsden and Renting 2003
2. Sonnino and Marsden 2006, Hinrichs 2003
3. van Trijp, Schifferstein 1995; Rapp 1998
4. Steenkamp 1990
6. Featherstone and Lash, 1999
8. Cova 1996
10. In Marxist theory, commodity fetishism is a state of social relations in which social relationships are defined by the values that are placed on commodities
11. This is at the basis of social stratification, as illustrated by Thornstein Veblen (1989) in his ‘Theory of leisure class’
12. For a case study on this aspect, see Brunori et al. (2005)
14. This definition originates from Lancaster’s theory of consumer demand, according to which goods are consumed for the characteristics they possess. See Lancaster (1966)
15. see also Hinrichs 2003
16. See for example the Coldiretti – the largest farmers’ association in Italy - website, www.coldiretti.it to have an idea of the importance of this issue
17. PGI: Protected Geographical Indication For a short description of Lardo di Colonnata case, see Brunori (2006)
18. PDO: Protected Denomination of Origin
19. Marsden, Renting 2003
20. Iacoponi et al 1995
21. see also Sonnino and Marsden, 2006
22. Winter 2003
23. Guthman 2002

ABSTRACTS

The article sets out to develop a framework based on the ‘transformational’ power of local food, in a bid to interpret, and support the active building of, food relocalization strategies. The article starts by illustrating a semiotic model for the analysis of food quality, aimed at interpreting changes in the food system that come about as food acquires new meaning. This model is then applied to the process of qualification as proposed by Michel Callon and others. An application of the model to interpret and to evaluate food relocalization strategies follows. The activities of Slow Food, a food movement born in Italy about 20 years ago, are given as illustration and analysed. The article concludes with a discussion of the framework’s possibilities and limitations.
INDEX

**Mots-clés:** produits locaux, stratégies de relocalisation, produits localisés  
**Keywords:** qualification, local food, quality, relocalization strategies, locality food

AUTHOR

**GIANLUCA BRUNORI**

University of Pisa  
gbrunori(at)agr[point]unipi[point]it