

International Conference on: Green Urbanism

12-14 October 2016

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Food, health and society: the town meets the countryside

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Introduction

It is not long time that food culture has undertaken a process of renewal started when severe food safety problems did reveal through the “food scandals”: the so called *mad cow disease* (BSE, Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) or the *swine flu and bird flu*, and other various contaminations occurred in the late 20th century. The first development in food culture, so long, was due to safety needs but was the beginning of a new consciousness about the importance of food and diet on human health.

Quickly, the demand for quality food oriented itself towards qualitative – local, traditional, organic – food features. This was a great challenge and a new opportunity for agriculture: to supply valuable goods and new services, to a wide range of consumers, searching for local, ecological, ethical, healthy requisites, from food and country.

In the meanwhile a new sensibility has grown referring to urban life quality, due to overcrowded cities that hardly supply the needed services and suffer for the loosening of the contact with the environment as well as with the countryside.

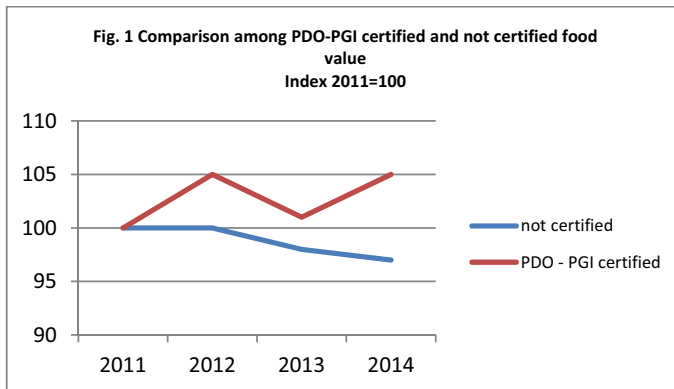
In this context, food has become, in a wide sense, the mean by which the territory is supplied inside the town: a food that must be evocative of nature and history, healthy and correlated with the share of social values.

Quality in food sector

In the consumeristic economy, access to food is regulated by market competition, a way that allows to allocate goods in quantity but fails in allocating their quality. At the same time the *non-price goods*, like environmental goods, are not regulated by market, once nobody has to pay for them; this results in waste of ecological resources due to disregarding the cost of their reproduction, because: *in the long run we are all dead* (J. M. Keynes in “A Tract on Monetary Reform”, cap. 3, 1923).

One of the strongest engines of the economy has ever been the increase in consumption linked to rising income and population growth. Driven by rising economy and population, the food market as

always been a growing market. In the last years, for the first time, a decrease in food consumption has been registered in developed countries as a result of economic recession and demographic stability. In this context agriculture has had to pursue better economic results no longer through higher efficiency and returns to scale but through an enhanced quality, able to meet an higher willingness to pay of the consumers for typical and healthy food (Cantarelli, 2005). For example, in Italy from 2011 to 2014 the value of PDO or PGI certified food is risen by 5%, in the meanwhile not certified food is fallen by 3% (Fig. 1).



Source: processing of ISMEA data, Qualivita report.

Moreover, the demand for quality has been boosted by the need to ensure food safety, following the remembered contamination events, but is now related with healthy diets too; according with a new consciousness of the role food plays in causing metabolic diseases because of overeating or when poor in quality. The safe and healthy diet is therefore a demanded need of consumers and also a public good because of the need to prevent public health costs and losses in human capital.

The market demand for quality food is therefore driven by the search for: health, environment, landscape, culture, ethic values but also agriculture and gastronomy specificities.

Through the use and the sharing of goods with such characteristics, the *user* wants to tell the others his own view of life; food is the mean to express oneself. So that, if in the market economy, man is defined for his economic function of *consumer*, the post-modern vision defines him as a *consumer-actor*, meaning that he pursue the aim to play an active role, conscious and oriented to relations, in his purchase of goods and services (touristic, relational, healthy, etc...) (Viganò et al. 2015).

The meaning of the term “quality” has deeply changed in time: at the beginning of the twentieth century (during the tayloristic period), it was only a technic able to statistically measure the defects; nowadays, quality, is intended to be a way to conceive the social relations. Quality is a *shared*

convention and can be obtained by sharing the territory by the resident population, and results from the dialogue among the producers and among the producers and the consumers (Distaso, 2007). While market economy is commonly identified with the competition among suppliers to sell and among consumers to buy, the economy of quality is based on sharing, confidence and dialogue between producers and consumers.

Once quality is defined through many different aspects: environment, health, culture, relations; it clearly appears that territory is an attribute of the quality of goods.

The new competition on market is a competition among territories; goods, whose characteristics are related with the territory are, then, typical, differentiated, and hardly reproducible outside the area of origin. A qualitative and competitive territory is shared by people living in it; people that feel to belong to the territory and that cooperate in the pursue of common objectives (Distaso, cit.).

We can say: quality is a dimension of the community life.

The loosening of the relation between man and land

In time, agriculture has developed more and more efficient technics looking at increasing the yields and reducing the costs. Nowadays, industrialized agriculture is based on highly mechanized and labour saving techniques; therefore, crops and livestock require much less work and families no longer attend to the farms. In the developing process of the economy, agriculture weight decrease while the share of industrial activities and service industry rise; so, the productive centre of gravity moves from countryside towards the town. Since the sixties of the twentieth century a massive movement from country (the so called “rural exodus” analysed by agricultural economists) has caused depopulation and environmental degradation. At the same time, to receive the rising population, cities have been growing under the influence of the economic needs and the possibilities offered by transport and building technologies.

According to a very critical interpretation, modern town has developed following the rules of capitalism, where every element is intended for a total control of space and of the man living in it (Atkinson, 2009).

A recent study concerning the *parkour*, the art of movement¹, has analysed the reality of Sarcelles, one among the *Villes Nouvelles* around Paris, where: *men leave early in the morning to go to work and go back home late in the evening. Habitants complain of boredom and depression... is a town where it is impossible to meet each other* (G. M. Columba, 2015). Our overgrown towns have lost the contact with the territory and citizens are isolated from each other.

¹Born in France in late nineties is defined: l’art du déplacement. Has become the symbol of a re-appropriation of the city by young people.

Linking town and countryside

Citizens, so long, demand for rurality to overcome the restraints of urban living and agriculture offers restoration and rural tourism but also a food supply related to local specificities: territory becomes a part of the goods themselves (Scarso e Squadrilli, 2015), while quality food carries rural territory inside the town.

It is also possible to outline a mutual return of the green into the town: urban agriculture, city woods, urban gardens, etc.; but the same role is also played by farmer's markets and purchasing groups: places of direct exchange between producer and user of *zero kilometres* products. Finally, were born new organized distribution forms, based on local goods and deploying, over the food supply, a multifunction approach: education, debate, catering (i.e. the experience of Sanlorenzo market², in Palermo).

Food environment³ become a basic condition for healthy and fair urban living. Food environments can be described in different ways: the location of retail outlets in a community; the range and types of foods available to consumers; the information provided to consumers about foods; and organizational structures which affect food access and availability (such as retail networks).

The linkage between public health problems resulting from poor diet, and the retail food environment found in a community is, in part, common sense. What we eat is influenced by what's readily available in our community. There is growing evidence that what we eat – and the likelihood of being obese – are influenced by the food environment. Increasing evidence suggests that environmental factors, including the food available for purchase in a community, influences the types and quantities of food that people purchase and consume. Retail food outlets that sell affordable, high quality, nutritious foods can encourage a healthy diet, reducing an individual's risk for chronic diseases, including obesity and diabetes. Higher RFEI (Retail Food Environment Index) has been shown to be correlated with increased obesity in the USA and around the world.

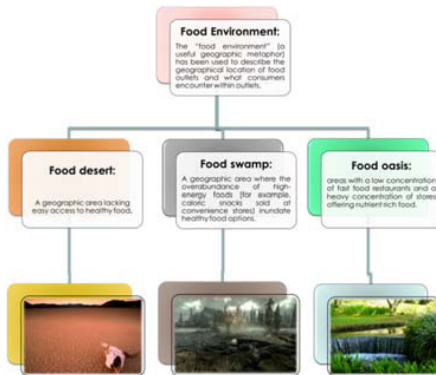
$$RFEI = \frac{\text{fast food restaurants} + \text{convenience stores}}{\text{supermarkets} + \text{small grocery stores} + \text{farmers markets}}$$

A high-quality food environment is a necessary condition for the adoption of healthy eating behaviors. Access to stores that sell affordable, nutritious food is a prerequisite for adopting a

² <http://www.sanlorenzomercato.it/>

³ Number, type, size, and location of food stores; availability (supply) of food categories (e.g., fresh fruits); and variety of different items within a category (e.g., different types of fresh fruits); price and quality of food items.

healthful diet. Healthful food strategies should focus on changing food environments to improve overall community health.



To improve Neighbourhood Food Environments

By mapping the retail environment, land use patterns and street network, as well as analysing local policies and codes relevant to food access, an assessment of the food landscape can help stakeholders make the right decision for their community. Observational measures of the quality of retail food environments, as characterized by availability, accessibility and pricing, provide a useful method for comparing food environments between neighbourhoods.

Food Oasis is a metaphor focused on developing innovative, self-sustaining ways to empower residents of food deserts to get better access to healthy foods. Whether we define it as a desert or a swamp, everyone needs easy access to healthy, affordable food.

A preliminary study was carried on in the third District (III Circonscrizione) of the city of Palermo; an area of 2,034.7 hectares, which population counts 74,144 units. Data were collected on field and uploaded using a GIS software. In the study area were found 306 food shops and restaurants⁴. The study revealed a process of urban desertification due to the disappearing of small food shops that affects the whole city area of Palermo (Columba et. Al., 2014).

⁴ Density of food shops (number of shops for 1000 people) is the measure of availability and accessibility.

Conclusions

The food topic relevance in towns is more and more growing and may become critical in next years. Some local governments are now working to identify innovative urban policies on food (food plans), promoting studies able to identify problems related to proper food management and defining coherent action plans in urban areas. The main objectives, the city governments pursue, are: improving health, knowledge and consciousness on food topic amid the citizens; accessibility of quality food consumption; sustainability (availability, food waste, recycling, environmental and energetic impacts, etc.).

Similarly, the Italian Wine Cities Association has recently promoted the development of the *regulatory plans of wine cities*, a planning approach based on the rural heritage surrounding the cities.

The quality of the territory and the quality of food are tightly linked and are basic elements of the functional integration between urban and rural areas by offering both environmental attractiveness – environmental services – and touristic usability.

Searching for an improved life quality (instead of searching for profit only) means that planning the city is planning the surrounding territory as well. Rural areas can be seen as the connective tissue among the parts composing the r-urban (rural and urban) landscape as a whole. This joint planning may counteract the impacts of the spread urbanisation and contribute to avoid the urban sprawl on the rural land; may give birth to qualified places for exchanging, sharing and having leisure; may, finally, provide the new technologic functions of a *green town* (i.e. renewable energy production, sustainable waste management, etc.).

Relational Integrated Tourism could, in this context, join together several components of local specific characters: new extended city, landscape archaeology, rural villages, quality food and agriculture, sustainable tourism, relations (Naselli, 2016).

A new arrangement of the territorial components should start by the comprehension of a renewed role that citizens (the consum-actors) may take in governance choices for the rural landscape, according with profitable relationships they can build (or-rebuild) between man and environment.

In conclusion, we can say, according with the art historian Tomaso Montanari (Salone del Gusto, Turin, October 23, 2014): *the inseparable context, landscape – heritage – food, can and indeed must, do not generate new customers, but new citizens.*

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