

Routledge Studies in Food, Society and the Environment

SUSTAINABLE CONSUMPTION AND EVERYDAY FOOD PRACTICES IN EUROPE

Edited by
Virginie Amilien, Monia Saïdi,
and Matthieu Dubois de Labarre



Sustainable Consumption and Everyday Food Practices in Europe

Presenting contemporary case studies of everyday food practices, this book examines food habits and the ways they are evolving or resisting change.

The book draws on primary research with families, examining consumer practices and perceptions of food sustainability. It amplifies the voices of ordinary people, exploring how they experience and navigate everyday food practices. The concept of narrative provides a robust foundation for a dynamic and coherent conceptual approach while combining a social practice perspective which examines the interplay between routines, norms, ethics, and reflexivity with pragmatic sociology. This allows the analysis to follow food practices through adjustments and justifications. Focusing on food quality schemes as institutional tools for improving sustainable food systems, it includes diverse case studies from France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Serbia, the UK, as well as Sweden and Australia. Authors employ multi-method qualitative approaches to capture the interplay of discourses, practices, and materialities. The volume proposes research tools and methods for sustainable food, offering insights into how everyday food practices can contribute to socio-ecological food transitions.

This book will appeal to students, researchers, and policymakers interested in sustainable food systems and consumption, and their intersections with sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and sustainable development.

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Matthieu Dubois de Labarre**



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Foreword

Fabio Parasecoli

Sustainability has become such a buzzword in recent decades – from activism to academia, from environmental policy to corporate greenwashing – that at times it is hard to agree on what it means, why it should be relevant, and how it can be achieved. Its widespread use and misuse have made it murky, so that its relevance has become easier to dispute and, in some cases, deny.

The chapters in this volume try to recentre the conversation about sustainability by drawing attention to a particular sphere of social life – everyday food practices, especially in domestic environments – that constitute a crucial arena in which the concept (or should we say ideal?) and its value are constantly negotiated, shifting in meaning and impact. Although the authors focus mainly on Europe, many takeaways are also significant outside of Western cultures. As a matter of fact, the book keeps on reminding us that the narratives, the materiality, and the habits that constantly emerge around sustainability are deeply contextual, and we cannot expect to find a one-size-fits-all definition, let alone uniform concrete applications. The chapters all imply that valuation is an ongoing process, advancing through shifts, transformations, and contradictions.

Each in their own fashion, the authors reflect on how we, as consumers, determine the value of the food we buy and eat, considering value not only in the monetary sense but also in terms of social distinction, cultural representativity, and individual and communal identities. Against this background, the book emphasises the relevance and the viability of what can be described as Food Quality Schemes (also known in literature as value-based and place-based labels) and their effectiveness in helping consumers make more sustainable choices. These systems, meant to guarantee quality certification and control, materialise the varied interests of producers, consumers, and authorities – ranging from the local to the international level – in products whose origins are known, whose production methods are considered safer, and which come from closer locations with a smaller carbon footprint.

However, what does a descriptor like ‘organic’ mean to shoppers? How about ‘geographical indications’ or even ‘local’? How much do they weigh in their purchase decisions? Do they have an impact on the way we store, cook, and dispose of food? Above all, can these schemes contribute to mold our habits toward a more sustainable lifestyle? Moreover, it is important to remember that these descriptors can contribute to the tribalisation of consumers based on their purchasing power, education, class, and in certain cases even religion and ethnicity. Buying organic

heirloom apples in a farmers' market publicly indicates a set of priorities and values that other consumers – who for time or income reasons can only shop at a hypermarket – may resent as too removed from their reality. Too elitist, to use an expression that has recently acquired great political weight.

In a post-truth, increasingly polarised political climate, these concerns can be leveraged to turn food in an ideological tool in politics. The rise of nationalistic, ethnocentric, anti-immigrant, sovereignist, or populist movements has seen the advent of what I have conceptualised elsewhere as 'exclusionary gastronativism' to create barriers between 'us' and 'them,' in any way that in-groups may be defined, contesting received wisdom about citizenship and belonging (Parasecoli 2022).

Such difficulties remind us that the socio-ecological transition is inherently political. At such, the food system constitutes what designers may consider a 'wicked problem,' in which different stakeholders have diverse and at time contrasting needs, priorities, and preferences (Rittel and Webber 1974). Is it even possible to find agreement on what the transition should be like, its worth, and its chances to succeed? Political perspectives remain crucial in determining the relevance and meaning of sustainability, casting doubt on its effectiveness to get people to participate in improving the food system. Several chapters emphasise the essential role that participative methods and democratic decision-making processes should play in such issues.

The lived experiences of consumers, their emotions, and their imagination take center stage in the volume. Such focus elicits in several of the volume authors a profound methodological reflection: how can researchers, especially in academia, explore such dimensions of everyday life? Can their physical and emotional participation enhance their capacity to connect with their interlocutors? How can the parameters of ethnographic work be expanded to embrace such an ever-shifting context? And more importantly, how can scholars include stakeholders in their work and share their findings with them? The chapters in the volume variously highlight the need to include embodied learning, action research, participative experiences, and co-creation to reduce the distance between researchers and stakeholders in the shared effort to achieve a more sustainable food system. Such approaches require taking into consideration affective and material aspects, while recognising the expertise and knowledge embedded in local communities.

In their search for novel ethnographic approaches, several authors in the volume emphasise how imagination and storytelling can be leveraged to explore possibilities and rethink what is considered doable and actionable. The utopias that result from this kind of bottom-up work, organically emerging from interactions between human and non-human stakeholders, can function as aspirational frameworks, to use Ove Jakobsen's expression (see p.191), to negotiate the very meaning of sustainability in different life-worlds. Heeding Immanuel Wallerstein's caveat, such flexibility should avoid the danger that utopias breed illusions and disillusion, becoming 'justifications for terrible wrongs' (Wallerstein 1998: 1).

These theoretical and methodological considerations in this volume can be easily applied to other features of the food system that, due to their influence, require urgent reflection and intervention. The impact of tourism on food systems and

Food Quality Schemes that aspire to be local, healthy, environmentally friendly, and socially relevant needs to be taken into consideration when discussing sustainability (Hall and Gössling 2016). This aspect is particularly relevant in countries where mass tourism heavily affects consumers' everyday lives. Equally strategic is a reflection on the growing centrality of digital foodscapes, which heavily determine the sociocultural context in which producers, consumers, activists, government officials, and the researchers themselves are steeped and make all kinds of decisions regarding sustainability. Social media now offer standards to evaluate reality, practices to incorporate in one's lived experiences, and novel forms of interpersonal relations and socialisations (Leer and Strøm Krogager 2021). Considering the impact of self-proclaimed gurus and influencers, it is critical for researchers – but also activists and government representatives – to develop theories and methodologies to tackle virtual spaces, operate in them, and use them in their projects.

The resilience and sustainability of food systems relies increasingly on the capacity of all stakeholders involved to establish common languages, identify common goals, and collaborate toward their achievement. The pathways this volume's authors explore suggest forms of rigorous and socially relevant intellectual engagement and partnerships with civil society at a time when it has become evident that, as academics, we cannot isolate ourselves from the world and from current events.

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Editors' note

This book, a vessel of stories, is itself a story – a tale beautiful, enriching, and brimming with challenges and unexpected twists. The idea for this volume emerged nearly five years ago during collaborative work within the Strength2Food project, shaped through discussions with several team members. The editorial committee ultimately comprised two members of the project team: one from the University of Oslo, who at the time led the Strength2Food qualitative research task on consumption, and one from the Institut Agro Dijon. On the French side, the collaboration underwent some changes when Monia replaced Matthieu in the spring of 2025.

Originally, the publication with Routledge / Taylor Francis was planned for autumn 2024. However, various delays and unforeseen obstacles meant that the manuscript, nearly finished by then, was not submitted to the publisher until just before the summer of 2025. As neither of the two editors overseeing the copyediting process was a native English speaker, a third collaborator – an artificial intelligence tool specialising in language and copyediting – was brought on board. Additionally, artificial intelligence was employed to assist in translating certain passages into English and reformatting the bibliography to support the editorial process.

In the end, to ensure that this book remains accessible to all, the editors secured the necessary funding for an open-access release alongside its traditional publication. For this, we extend our deepest gratitude to our respective institutions, whose unwavering support made this tale a reality. Our heartfelt thanks go to Oslo Metropolitan University and the Unité Mixte de Recherche (UMR) Centre d'Economie et de Sociologie Appliquées à l'Agriculture et aux Espaces Ruraux (CESAER) at Institut Agro Dijon, France, for their trust, their generosity, and their enduring belief in the power of shared knowledge.

Virginie Amilien and Monia Saïdi



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Introducing ‘let eat be’

A book exploring everyday food practices through the lens of sustainable consumption

*Monia Saïdi, Virginie Amilien, and
Valentin Bellassen*

The story¹

It all began with an idea, driven by a profound desire to understand how the sustainability of the European food system could be improved. Through hundreds of hours of intense collaboration, collective effort, and the exceptional insight and expertise of the coordinating team, this proposition transformed into a proposal and, five years later, to a fully realised project: the Strength2Food project,² a European Union-funded research initiative under the Horizon 2020 program, running from 2016 to 2021, aiming at improving the sustainability and effectiveness of food systems in Europe and beyond by focusing on quality food products, short food supply chains, and public sector food procurement. The project was built on ten work packages, and this book emerged from the collaboration of the research team working on the qualitative approach to consumers (work package 8). The primary objective was to observe and gain a deeper understanding of how European consumers *perceive, value, trust, and particularly purchase and utilize EU, national, and regional food quality labels*.³ In the qualitative part, special emphasis was placed on using ethnographic fieldwork to explore and identify discrepancies between consumers’ expressed valuations and their actual food consumption practices, including planning, purchasing, using/cooking/eating, and disposal. Furthermore, the study investigated consumers’ perceptions and demands for additional or modified policy measures to enhance sustainable food chains.

After several years, the extensive fieldwork and qualitative data collection across seven European countries revealed the complexity and depth of consumer behaviour, highlighting potential gaps between consumers’ valuation of sustainable food chains and their actual food practices. Ideas took root, blossoming into a book whose concept had thus been conceived. Initially, the working title of this work was a play on words: ‘let eat be,’ with a nod to the Beatles. However, it’s not easy to play with words when you do not master a language perfectly; it turns out that ‘let eat be’ does not really make sense in English — as it’s a grammatically incorrect or incomplete sentence. Moreover, our publisher found it quite difficult to understand what a book with such a title would be about. We therefore opted for a much clearer title, *Sustainable Consumption and Everyday Food Practices*

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in Europe. Nevertheless, the little marbles remained a sort of guiding thread that we would like to delve into a bit more, as they reflect many different facets of this work.

In accordance with Edgar Morin's principles for understanding 'complex thought' (Morin, 2008 and 2015, p. 114), it was essential to have a comprehensive overview of the socio-cultural context surrounding food practices and food quality schemes to ensure a non-reductive study capable of capturing such complexity. Consequently, the focus was not solely on food quality schemes themselves – a central and common objective of the overall project – but on the integration of food quality labels within everyday food practices. Additionally, it was necessary to contextualise food consumption practices and their relationship to food quality schemes within the national and EU institutional framework. While the Strength2Food study examined sustainable food practices from a consumer perspective, it did not seek to evaluate the merits of sustainable development as a political agenda in comparison to regenerative production and holistic management. Although some participants suggested that greener production and more sustainable consumption may not address the fundamental societal and environmental challenges facing our world, this book does not aim to offer philosophical or psychological insights.

This book, originally dedicated to the ethnographic work of the project, has gradually transformed over time due to societal changes, personal constraints, and editor requests, many factors that ensure things are never as planned, but was instead enriched with new ideas and dimensions. Thus the work first expanded to include other research beyond that of Strength2Food to give a broader scope to the subject. Then an entire section of the book was dedicated to a socio-ecological transition and the potential tools introduced by social sciences.

'Let eat be'

This introduction builds on four pillars, communicating with each other throughout the whole book. In the first part, we will define the main concepts – to agree about the wording – before taking some distance and introducing the idea of negotiation of concepts. This will lead us to the second part, where we try to understand what is hidden behind the working title of the book, as 'let eat be' works as an Ariadne's thread for the comprehension of what a sustainable diet is and how we might get there. A third part opens towards a general approach whose objective is to present an evidence-based approach to a sustainable diet. This quantitative overview of the question shapes a fundamental frame, showing the challenge that sustainable food represents on a large scale, informing about knowledge, and proposing transformations to be set in motion to achieve sustainable food consumption. But much remains unsaid about how these transformations are lived, felt, and brought to life within households by individuals themselves. This is precisely the focus of our book, which weaves through personal stories and everyday practices, unraveling them with qualitative approaches developed in the thirteen chapters that we gently

introduce in the final section of this introduction. Before proceeding, it is necessary to define our key concepts.

Why let eat be?

So, initially, it was 'let eat be.' Only three words. These three words form the foundation of this work. 'Let eat be' (literally: let eating be) is a way of saying to our informants: let your eating habits be, so we can share them; and a way to tell the reader: let's listen to our informants. Let's consider their stories, gestures, habits, and justifications. Let's see what and how they eat. Let's hear why and how they do. Before we can transform habits, we need to understand the logic. As developed in the conceptual framework (see Chapter 1), every eating practice says something about the individual, their relationship to the world, themselves, and others. 'Let eat be' proposes originally to recognise that food is a place where routine and difficult choices merge with creativity, heritage, and identity. And sometimes, to observe it well, we must let things be and let people and texts speak, which is the core of this book.

However, throughout the becoming of the book, while chapters were being built and took form, the strange and ambiguous meaning of 'let eat be' has also invited us to think about food differently. We used this phrase to provoke ourselves – and hopefully readers afterwards – to also think more about food and health while focusing on quality food products and schemes. Because eating is not just the action alone. Behind the everyday eating practices of our informants and in their words and actions, we hear decisions laden with stakes related to health, environment, practicality, ethics, economy, or identity; we see the power of infrastructures (stores, roads, or work hours), institutions, traditions (cultural and social), systems (agricultural, political, commercial), and the weight of these decisions in a complex universe. This explains our theoretical approach (see Chapter 3), but it also reminded us that eating has also become a source of choices and anxiety. 'Let eat be' would then also sound like a gentle resistance in a complex world saturated with injunctions, highlighting the importance of the act of eating and the value of food.

'Let eat be' to some extent means *let food exist*, as an invitation to reconnect with the act of eating as something fundamental, connecting to the concepts of sustainability and everyday food practices inherent in this book. But what is an environmentally sustainable diet?

What is an environmentally sustainable diet?

A quick look on the internet for an answer, and you get the intuitive response: little meat and lots of local, fresh, organic, and seasonal products. Some of these intuitions are supported by scientific evidence, and some are not. In a nutshell, the cornerstone of an environmentally sustainable diet is sobriety in animal produce. Localism, freshness, seasonality and organic certification are only of secondary importance.

‘Multi-criteria’ does not mean ‘equi-criteria’

As far as the environment is concerned, a sustainable diet is a close synonym for a climate-friendly diet for two reasons. First, because the climate issue is more urgent than other environmental issues, and second, because the carbon footprint is an integrative indicator, positively correlated with most other environmental indicators.

There is a consensus on the principle of multi-criteria evaluation: there is no point in favouring a product that provides a tiny benefit in one aspect at the cost of a major deterioration in another. This does not mean, however, that all the criteria are equal and that, for example, an environmental score can be summed up as an unweighted average of the impacts on different components (Bockstaller et al., 2015; Rigby et al., 2001). There are several arguments for giving climate change a prominent place when assessing the environmental sustainability of food products:

- The impact of climate change is by far the most frightening among environmental problems. Farmers and their neighbours exposed to pesticides have a higher risk of cancer, and water pollution increases the costs of drinking water as well as clean beaches. But climate change is on its way to make tropical regions, home to a good third of humanity, unsuitable for human life (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2023). From an economic perspective, the extinction of all pollinators would cost around 1–2% of GDP (Lippert et al., 2021), whereas the impacts of current climate change trajectories are estimated at several tens of percentage points of GDP (Rose et al., 2022).
- The climate issue is more urgent than other environmental issues. The time it takes for the other components of environmental quality (water quality and quantity, biodiversity, etc.) to return to equilibrium is generally of the order of a decade or a century, whereas for the climate it is of the order of a million years (irreversibility). Moreover, climate change is itself one of the main causes of deterioration in other environmental components, such as biodiversity and water (e.g., Ay et al., 2014; IPBES, 2019), but the converse is generally false.
- In the food sector, climate impact is correlated with many other environmental components (Castellani et al., 2017; Rös et al., 2013). This is particularly the case for eutrophication, via the use of fertilisers and animal manure, energy use, via fossil fuels, and biodiversity, via the storage of carbon in grasslands and forests. So, in the most frequent cases, an improvement in the carbon footprint is accompanied by an improvement in most environmental impacts.

For these reasons, the climate issue is without doubt the environmental problem most widely recognised by public policy, reflecting its high degree of urgency. It is the subject of French and European strategies that are regularly revised and translated into costly regulations, such as the European carbon market and carbon tax. More recently, through the Citizens’ Climate Convention, the climate issue

has been the subject of the first French experiment in participatory democracy on a national scale.

What is a climate-friendly diet, then?

Impact on climate change

Basic concepts of the climate impact of food products

Improving practices is only a second-order lever, after modifying diets

On a global scale, net emissions – including deforestation – linked to food are estimated at between 11 and 18 GtCO₂eq per year (Rogissart et al., 2019). 75% of these emissions take place before leaving the farm, and 61% are due to animal products. On a European scale, the share of animal products reaches around 80% (Leip et al., 2010; Sandström et al., 2018). In France, it was recently estimated at 70%, excluding deforestation (Barbier et al., 2019). Including land-use changes, mainly caused by livestock farming, would undoubtedly raise the share of animal products around the European average. Including carbon storage from grasslands and other management practices may slightly reduce the share of animal products, but not substantially. A typical hectare of grassland is currently estimated to be storing around 0.4 tCO₂/ha/yr (Pellerin et al., 2019), that is between one-tenth and one-twentieth of the emissions of the cows it feeds.

Because what happens after the farm contributes only modestly to the environmental impact of food, freshness, localism, and seasonality matter little. Avoiding food waste does matter however, assuming that the avoided waste allows a reduction in overall food production. Provided this perfect substitution happens, halving waste could reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 10–15% (Rogissart et al., 2019).

Despite the importance of on-farm emissions, large-scale studies show that feed emissions cannot be reduced by more than 10–20% by agricultural practices alone (ex., Pellerin et al., 2013; Pérez Dominguez et al., 2016; Poux & Aubert, 2018; Tibi et al., 2020).⁴ This is due to the importance of livestock-related emissions, within which enteric fermentation – relatively incompressible – accounts for more than half. These low levels of emissions reduction are not compatible with the objectives of the European Union and France, both of which aim to reduce agricultural emissions by around 50%. Factoring in the carbon storage potential on agricultural land could tip the scale by offsetting up to half of agricultural emissions but entails a revolution in agricultural practices as agroforestry, currently a marginal practice, makes up half of this potential (Bamière et al., 2023; Bellassen et al., 2022).

Reducing livestock numbers and animal protein consumption, which in turn can cut food emissions by between 30% and 60%, is therefore a necessary condition for achieving European and French climate mitigation targets (ex., ADEME, 2013; Barbier et al., 2019; Lacour et al., 2018; Poux & Aubert, 2018; Scarborough et al., 2014; Springmann et al., 2018). It is also a key lever for multiple aspects of food system sustainability (ex., Bonnet et al., 2020).

These figures have a direct consequence in terms of environmental labelling of food products: labelling must first and foremost encourage consumers to avoid

product categories with high emissions. Directing consumers towards products with lower-emission practices within a given category will have a second-order impact.

Impact per tonne versus impact per hectare

Assessing the environmental impact of agriculture, typically by life cycle assessment (LCA), is very sensitive to the *functional unit* chosen for the analysis. In the case of certified food products, two functional units are often discussed: the quantity of product (e.g., a litre of milk, a tonne of wheat) or the hectare of land (ex. , Salou et al., 2017). Both approaches have their strengths and limitations: from an economic perspective, standardising by product quantity amounts to assuming that demand is completely inelastic. This is a good approximation for staple products such as bread or rice, but it becomes questionable for ‘pleasure’ consumption, particularly meat. Conversely, using the hectare as a functional unit means considering demand that will decrease or increase proportionally to yield, which is unrealistic in most cases.

A more instructive way to determine which functional unit is relevant is to ask what the user’s objective is. In the case of environmental labelling, consumers seek to reduce the impact of their purchases. Since they buy quantities of products and not hectares, the quantity of product is the most relevant functional unit.

However, the ‘per hectare’ metric remains useful in certain cases and especially for certain audiences, for example, for a local authority seeking to protect a drinking water catchment area. In this case, the local authority is seeking to limit pollution per unit of surface area surrounding the catchment area, and the quantity of food produced by these areas is only of secondary importance to it. As organic farming pollutes less water per unit of surface area (we explain why a little further down in this text), it is therefore in the local authority’s best interests for the surrounding farms to convert to organic farming and to subsidise such a transition, as the water agencies do.

Another way to look at the issue is to consider that the impact per hectare is often relevant for local public goods such as water quantity or quality, whereas the impact per tonne is more often relevant for global or larger-scale public goods such as climate, energy resources, and even biodiversity.

The ‘gross’ carbon footprint of certified products: no significant difference

The most common measure of the climatic impact of a food product is the ‘gross’ carbon footprint – i.e., greenhouse gas emissions alone, without considering carbon storage by biomass and soils – expressed per tonne of product. On this measure (tonne of protein), animal produce pollute two (chicken) to ten (beef) times more than vegetal ones (Poore & Nemecek, 2018).

Certified products however – organically grown or geographical indications – do not differ substantially from their conventional equivalents (Bellassen et al., 2021b; Boschiero et al., 2023; Chiriaco et al., 2022; Clark & Tilman, 2017; Meier

et al., 2015; Tuomisto et al., 2012). Two opposing forces offset each other. On the one hand, emissions per hectare are lower for certified products. This is linked in particular to the absence or reduced use of mineral fertilisers, as well as to more sober fodder, with a higher proportion of grass. On the other hand, yields are also lower, from 20–50% in organic farming (Bellassen et al., 2021b; Huet et al., submitted; Seufert & Ramankutty, 2017; Smith et al., 2019) and 5–20% for geographical indications (Bellassen et al., 2021b). By using a homogeneous method, thus reducing the noise linked to method heterogeneity, Bellassen et al. (2021b) show that organically grown plant products have a modest (16%), but significantly lower, median impact than their conventional equivalents. In the case of plant products, the reduction in yield is more than offset by the absence of mineral fertilisers.

On the other hand, greenhouse gas emissions per hectare of farmland are significantly lower for quality label products. In addition, the most organically orientated diets have a lower carbon footprint (Baudry et al., 2019; Lacour et al., 2018) or one equal (Treu et al., 2017) to that of conventional diets. Indeed, consumers who are more inclined towards organic farming tend to consume fewer animal products – which are high emitters – than the average consumer.

The 'net' carbon footprint of organic: possibly slightly lower

However, there are a number of limitations to the above results, not least the failure to take account of carbon storage in the soil and biomass. This component is complex to consider because of its temporal dynamics, but it can tip the balance, particularly for livestock production, where the difference between grassland and forage crops is significant. When this storage is taken into account, net emissions from organic milk become 20% lower than those from conventional milk (Lambotte et al., 2023). However, the lower yields of organic farming, intermediated by global markets, could also lead to deforestation and thus carbon destocking. This is known as 'indirect land use change.' Taking this effect into account in an LCA is not self-evident, as it depends at least as much on the land-use policies of the countries where deforestation occurs as on the behaviour of producers and consumers of organic produce. When this is considered, the advantage of organic milk is reduced to around 10%. When only this indirect effect is taken into account, and not direct storage on organic farms, the calculation turns to the advantage of conventional production (Bellora & Bureau, 2016; Searchinger et al., 2018).

Carbon footprint of short food supply chains: no substantial difference

Existing work does not identify any substantial difference in carbon footprint between short and long circuits (ex. , Astrom et al., 2013; Malak-Rawlikowska et al., 2019). The main reason is that transport accounts for only 5–20% of the carbon footprint of food (Barbier et al., 2019; Bellassen et al., 2021b; Rogissart et al., 2019). On the other hand, international transport accounts for only a third of transport-related emissions, a share comparable to the emissions by consumers on their journeys to purchase food (Barbier et al., 2019). This explains why, even

if we focus on transport-related emissions, short circuits are not necessarily more virtuous: the long, optimised journeys of long circuits may turn out to be less emitting than the additional journeys by private car or small utility vehicle inherent in some short circuits. On the other hand, it is possible that marketing through short circuits encourages producers to be more sober in their practices (Chiaverina et al., 2024; Millet-Amrani, 2020). Conversely, short distribution channels could hinder the exploitation of comparative environmental advantages (Avetisyan et al., 2014). These aspects, however, remain poorly documented.

Impact on other environmental issues

In the food sector, climate impact is correlated with many other environmental components (Castellani et al., 2017; Rööß et al., 2013). For this reason, animal producers are also responsible for the lion's share of the food sector's impact on other environmental components. In Europe, they represent 78% of the food sector's land consumption, 57% (pesticides) to 77% (nitrates) of its water pollution, half of its water consumption (excluding beverages) and 70–75% of its impact on biodiversity (Castellani et al., 2017; Crenna et al., 2019).

Land consumption and certified food

Because they have lower yields, certified production necessarily uses more land per unit of product. Unlike greenhouse gas emissions, taking into account the more plant-based nature of the diet of consumers of organic products is not enough to offset the lower yields in the diet (Baudry et al., 2019; Lacour et al., 2018; Treu et al., 2017). It should be noted that, if we look at the finished product, the quality of certified production can partially compensate for the lower yields. For example, Comté milk, which is more cheesable than conventional milk, requires only 18% more land than standard Emmental, whereas Comté milk requires 42% more land per litre (Bellassen et al., 2021b).

Water consumption and certified food

In terms of water consumption, mainly for irrigation, certified products are more sober: –28% per hectare and –14% per tonne (Bellassen et al., 2021a; Bodini et al., 2021). These results are confirmed by studies focusing on organic farming (Guyomard, 2013; Sautereau & Benoit, 2016).

Water quality

In terms of water pollution by nitrogen, certified production uses or discharges 25–60% less nitrogen per hectare (Bellassen et al., 2021a; Bodini et al., 2021; Guyomard, 2013; Sautereau & Benoit, 2016). On a per-tonne basis, the difference becomes insignificant. In fact, despite using less mineral nitrogen, certified production still consumes organic nitrogen and has lower yields.

In terms of water pollution by phytosanitary products, organic farming is logically more efficient, since it generally prohibits the use of synthetic products. In certain circumstances, however, phytosanitary products authorised for use in organic farming, particularly copper-based products, can contaminate soil and water (Guyomard, 2013). For other certified products, there is no quantified assessment of the issue.

Distance covered

Certified food products travel on average 30% less distance ('foodmiles') than their conventional equivalents (Drut et al., 2021). This better performance is primarily driven by the lower export share, but the local nature of inputs, often required by specifications, and their higher quality – less raw material required per unit of final product, as in the case of Comté – also play a role.

Biodiversity

Organically farmed areas show levels of abundance and species richness 20–50% higher than their conventional counterparts (Bengtsson et al., 2005; Seufert & Ramankutty, 2017; Smith et al., 2020, 2019). However, its overall impact on biodiversity is a complex issue. Firstly, because of lower yields, which can lead to deforestation at home and abroad. In fact, forests are the biome with the most biodiversity, whatever the geographical area considered (Duraiappah et al., 2005). The second reason is that, unlike other environmental components, there is no synthetic, consensual indicator of biodiversity. As illustrated by recent controversies over the degree of biodiversity decline, the choice or weighting of species monitored weighs heavily on the results (Desquilbet et al., 2020). Using a method which factors in the benefits of both land sharing (e.g., more hedges, fewer inputs) and land sparing (higher yield), Huet et al. (submitted) find that certified food has more impact on biodiversity per tonne of produce. However, this difference is one order of magnitude smaller than the difference between animal and vegetal produce.

While the objectivation of what an environmentally sustainable diet is narrows down the problem to the share of animal produce, this is not necessarily the perception of consumers.

Unveiling the essence of this volume

Indeed, eating practices are not solely a matter of rational choices dictated by environmental or economic norms: they are embedded in life stories, material constraints, cultural representations, and situated social relationships. To move toward meaningful sustainability, we need to better understand consumers' everyday food routines, their motivations, their constraints, and the obstacles they encounter. This is precisely what this book aims to explore: delving into the heart of experiences, narratives, and practices through qualitative studies based primarily on fieldwork. The following chapters are therefore no longer about measuring or quantifying, but

about listening, observing, and understanding what is encompassed in everyday life by what we call, or do not call, ‘local products,’ ‘organic products,’ or ‘sustainable food.’

Following the foreword by Fabio Parasecoli, the book begins with a three-voiced introductory text, featuring the editors alongside Valentin Bellassen, a renowned expert in sustainable consumption, who offers a comprehensive overview of the subject. This introduction sets the stage for the book, which is subsequently divided into three complementary parts. Part I comprises one conceptual outline and five chapters that examine everyday food practices through a blend of methodological, theoretical, and empirical approaches. Part II follows that line, inviting other scholars to the discussion. Part III takes an apparently different turn by focusing on methods that can facilitate socio-ecological transition.

So now let us begin with the first part of this book. The studies discussed in this section are exclusively derived from research conducted as part of Task 8.2 within the Strength2Food project. This part offers detailed insights into the daily routines and consumption patterns observed across diverse households.

In Chapter 1, which draws the conceptual and editorial line of the book, Virginie Amilien proposes a transversal view on sustainable consumption studies and explores the central concepts (sustainability, local food, food quality schemes, etc.) of the book. The concept of narrative serves as a ‘red thread’ throughout all chapters, providing a solid foundation for a dynamic and coherent conceptual approach. This offers a holistic vision of consumption.

In Chapter 2, Gun Roos and Virginie Amilien provide an in-depth exploration of qualitative methodologies. They present a ‘multifaceted recipe’ for an ethnographic approach aimed at understanding everyday food culture, with a particular focus on its tacit, routine, and unconscious dimensions. The fieldwork combined interactive methods such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, dialogic conversation, photography, and video recording, aimed at uncovering household food practices that might strengthen sustainability. This chapter explains the selection of these methods to understand how European consumers perceive, value, and trust food quality labels and products, focusing on discrepancies between stated values and actual food consumption practices – i.e., planning, purchasing, using/cooking/eating, and disposing.

Chapter 3 offers ‘Food for thoughts.’ Jean-Loup Lecœur and Virginie Amilien present their theoretical framework developed within the Strength2Food project, which has been further adapted and expanded for this volume.

This chapter examines everyday food practices through the lens of Social Practice Theory (SPT) and Convention Theory. While SPT, as outlined by Warde (2005), Reckwitz (2002), and Shove et al. (2012), focuses on the material, competence, and meaning aspects of practices, it is limited in addressing norms, justifications, and social change. To bridge this gap, Convention Theory is introduced, particularly Thévenot’s model of plural orders of worth (e.g., domestic, market, civic) and pragmatic regimes (familiarity, regular action, justification). By combining these frameworks, the analysis explores how consumers navigate food quality

schemes (FQS) within social conventions, highlighting their strategies and adaptations toward sustainable food practices.

The following three chapters examine various dimensions of sustainable consumption and the use of food quality products in everyday life. All three are grounded in the same ethnographic data, collected during the Strength2Food fieldwork, where researchers actively engaged with families in food purchasing, preparation, and consumption, uncovering insights into price sensitivity, related thoughts, and behaviours. Moreover, all three chapters have sought to experiment with an approach centered on spoken words and observed actions, allowing informants to express themselves without filters or researcher interpretation. The reader is invited to uncover the meaning within these words and glimpse the practices they reveal, guided by the analytical tools introduced in Chapters 1 and 3.

Chapter 4 gives an overview by exploring how quality and local/organic food integrate into consumption practices and potentially contribute to a more sustainable food system. Virginie Amilien, Gun Roos, and Vilde Haugrønning see the consumer as a 'carrier of practices,' whose behaviour is contextual and combines agency, communication, thoughts, products, and infrastructure. Through the lens of five chosen 'images' (coffee machine, food procurement, home cooking, food preservation, and leftovers). They illustrate how quality food is embedded in routines and impacts sustainability.

The importance of food pricing within Food Quality Schemes and sustainable consumption is specifically highlighted in Chapter 5. Authored by Galjina Ognjanov, Jelena Filipović, and Saša Veljković, it identifies the existence of consumer segments that are particularly price sensitive, especially those with lower socioeconomic status, whose purchasing decisions are heavily influenced by price elements, promotions, and discounts.

The notion of ethnocentrism is at the heart of Chapter 6, where Áron Török and Zalán Márk Maró investigate the role and meaning of ethnocentrism in consumer choices, particularly regarding local and regional products. While ethnocentrism can foster sustainability by reducing transport, it poses challenges in a globalised world, with foreign certifications less accepted than national ones.

To broaden the scope of understanding, Part II incorporates contributions from researchers who have applied similar methods in other projects conducted in Sweden and Norway, as well as in a comparative study between France and Australia. Three chapters offer a sustainable gaze upon food consumption in households.

Chapter 7, authored by Fairley Le Moal and John Coveney, examines sustainable food consumption through daily family mealtimes in French and Australian households. It explores how sustainability integrates with the 'work of care' during family meal practices, and whether environmental concerns are present. The comparison between France and Australia, with different sustainable consumption debates, offers insights into contemporary responsibilities concerning the ecological crisis.

In Chapter 8, the authors investigate the role of labelling schemes and local food culture in preserving and strengthening traditional varieties in Norway, using

the Ringerikes' potato as an example. Gunnar Vittersø, Sabina Kuraj, and Hanne Torjusen examine opportunities and obstacles faced by protected local varieties across production, distribution, and consumption. The analysis compares product evaluation by different actors and highlights mechanisms promoting or inhibiting endangered varieties, crucial for the local economy and cultural heritage.

Chapter 9 takes us to Sweden. Mathilda Marshall uses food storage practices as an entry point to explore kinship ties and alternative economic arrangements, and their implications for (un)sustainable food practices. Based on self-reported narratives, this chapter examines how different food modes and relationships are made visible through narratives of food storage within the household. The chapter shows how food storage involves the management of relationships inside and outside the household, including non-commercial exchanges such as gifting or temporary storage.

The final section of the book seeks to inspire socio-ecological transition by offering further reflections on sustainable food. As a nod to the title, 'let eat be,' this section has been named, 'Imagine All the People Sharing All the World.' The socio-ecological transition describes a global process aimed at transforming our societies to make them more sustainable (according to the four pillars of sustainability: environmental, economic, social, and cultural). It seemed relevant to us to conclude our studies on the 'say' and 'do' of consumers by opening to new 'sayings and doings' that would allow for changing and improving routines and choices, while simultaneously considering the loss of biodiversity, the depletion of natural resources, social inequalities, and climate change. The goal is to concretely link field observations, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and the consumption of the future. Here, we could once adopt a paragraph from the Brundtland report:

Yet in the end, sustainable development is not a fixed state of harmony but rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs. We do not pretend that this process is easy or straightforward. Painful choices have to be made. Thus, in the final analysis, sustainable development must rest on political will.

(UN et al., 1987) (par. 30)

Part III opens with an exploration of theories of the body and embodiment in everyday consumption, as presented in Chapter 10. Roberta Discetti introduces an innovative perspective on food practices, framing embodiment as both a way of 'making sense' of the world and an intrinsic aspect of being-in-the-world. Moreover, embodiment is positioned as a fundamental precondition for intersubjectivity. This chapter highlights theoretical approaches that place the body at the center of academic discourse, advocating for productive interdisciplinary engagement and cross-fertilisation between research on food practices and everyday consumption.

Chapter 11 examines dialogue as a potential tool for fostering new socio-ecological practices, focusing on the involvement of ordinary citizens in socio-ecological transitions. The authors present and analyse 'hybrid forums' and 'utopia workshops' as methods for exploring how scientific inquiry, dialogue, and collective imagination can converge to drive social transformation in the Anthropocene era. Hybrid forums are introduced as a means to balance experience-based and science-based expertise, thereby promoting more democratic decision-making processes. Utopia workshops, on the other hand, emphasise the cultivation of imagination and democratic engagement. The chapter proposes a 'hybrid epistemology' as a framework for co-constructing plural and just futures. Building on these approaches, Ove D. Jakobsen, Virginie Amilien, and Vivi Marie Lademoen Storsletten investigated merging the two methods in a Norwegian context within the Strength2Food project in Lofoten, offering insights to further develop and deepen this experimental approach.

While Chapter 11 explores the past, present, and future perspectives, Chapter 12 delves into future imaginaries. The analysis draws on responses from a Norwegian public questionnaire, focusing on food as a lens to examine how narratives, discourses, ideas, and representations of the future can influence current actions. Nina Heidenstrøm and Marie Cathrine Hebrok bring this innovative approach to life through student-created 'provotypes' (provocative design artifacts), demonstrating how these imaginaries can be translated into tangible products and services. As a fundamental human necessity, food plays a pivotal role in shaping our vision of the future, and discussions about food futures extend beyond what we might eat to encompass how we could live, organise society, and interact with nature, technology, and one another.

The final chapter completes the exploration of qualitative research findings from the Strength2Food project on consumers. Based on the same dataset as the chapters in the first section, Chapter 13 is not a way to close the loop, but to open the circle. It paves the way to the relatively underexplored realm of art-based research in the context of food consumption. Virginie Amilien and Gun Roos present there an experimental method designed to inspire and encourage readers to reconsider their consumption practices from a new perspective. Such a method has the potential to directly integrate various regimes of engagement, bridging the empirical and the theoretical, while connecting artistic vision with scientific data.

To provide the reader with an insightful and relevant perspective on these pages, we invited the coordinators of the former Strength2Food project, Matthew Gorton and Barbara Tocco, to write the conclusion to the volume. They graciously accepted and present an expert and critical analysis of the work in the final section.

If, for Claude Lévi-Strauss, food and its surrounding practices nourish not only the body but also the mind (often described as 'food for thought'), we hope this volume will, in turn, spark 'thoughts for food' by challenging its readers. Bon appétit!

Notes

- 1 The editors would like to underline that several parts of this chapter have been first written in French by the authors, then translated with Grammarly (a platform using artificial intelligence for English writing and copy editing) and lastly adapted / edited back to keep the original meaning.
- 2 Acknowledgement: The Strength2Food project received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 678024. It was a five-year EU-funded project that started in March 2016, building on a tight collaboration between '13 European academic partners, 2 third country academic partners (Thailand and Vietnam), 3 communication and training partners as well as a set of 12 international and national stakeholders from Member States and Associated countries who contributed actively to the work of the consortium.' This enormous and ambitious project turned out to be successful in every way: <https://www.strength2food.eu/research/>
 This book might never have been completed without the enthusiasm and serious participation (before fieldwork, during fieldwork, and, last but not least, after fieldwork, for analytical work and discussion of results) of all the researchers involved in task 8-2, nor without the incredible dedication from the 41 households and each of the informants: many thanks to all of them! We would eventually like to extend our gratitude to all the authors, and especially to our colleague Abdoul Diallo, for his invaluable contribution to the development of the index for this volume.
- 3 See DL 8-2 – for all deliverables and research outputs from Strength2Food refer to the project website: <https://www.strength2food.eu/publications/>
- 4 In this respect, it should be noted that the high variability of a product's carbon footprint is often used as an argument to justify the importance of agricultural practices as a lever for mitigation. This argument is misleading, as the heterogeneity of the carbon footprint has other probable causes, such as the heterogeneity of the methods used to assess it and the heterogeneity of the soil and climate conditions under which it is produced. Explaining the heterogeneity of the carbon footprint is an open scientific question.

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Part I

Everyday food practices in 40 European families

Sustainable sayings and doings - ‘The magic
mystery tour’ -



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1 Conceptual approach of ‘let eat be’

Virginie Amilien

Introduction

This first chapter introduces the book with a triangular conceptual approach, aiming to offer a transversal gaze to the reader.¹ It is about putting the various chapters of this work into perspective, proposing a red thread and thus offering a reading grid that is different yet complementary to the theoretical (chapter 3) and methodological (chapter 2) frameworks developed throughout the volume, hopefully providing a deeper understanding of studies on everyday eating practices and sustainable consumption to readers. This chapter aims to highlight the links between the core elements of this volume: research questions, methodology, and theoretical approaches through one conceptual framework at the heart of which lies the concept of narrative. As such, it combines approaches such as ‘narrative’ and ‘complex thinking’ to shape a framework that interconnects words and observations, and key empirical concepts like sustainability, food practices, or food quality schemes.

While statistical methods provide concrete insights into consumer attitudes and behaviours, this chapter explores the importance of narratives. Why focus on words? Why collect stories and images? Why visit, listen, discuss, observe, and experiment with others? Which words and concepts do we prioritise? And most importantly, why devote an entire volume to sharing these stories? By addressing these questions, the chapter invites readers to reflect on why stories matter in understanding human practices (Lareau et Rao, 2016) and how they contribute to a deeper dialogue about sustainable food and can enrich our understanding of sustainable practices. Narratives run through all chapters, providing a solid foundation for a dynamic and coherent conceptual approach.

A narrative is, in our context, a way of understanding and interpreting the world, a means to make sense of experiences, and a way to organise it all by hearing and speaking to others. Narratives, from informants, as well as researchers’ observations regarding what participants say and do, or do not say and do not do, constitute the core of this book. The empirical approach to studying consumers relies primarily on communication (from words to the absence of words, through facial expressions, frowns, or smiles) and interactivity (between participants and products, as well as between participants and researchers). The main approach adopted by the H2020 Strength2Food project (Part I of the book) has been to ‘let the field speak.’

This guiding principle, followed by most authors contributing to this volume, has become a central thread of this work.

A conceptual triangle based on narratives

Complex thinking

A central pillar is the perspective of ‘complex thinking,’ which highlights several issues emphasised both by existing literature – for example, in *The Practice of Eating*, where Warde insists that eating is a ‘compound practice’ where routines and conventions intersect and reinforce one another (Warde, 2016) – and by our own knowledge of the field, which identifies these issues as central: sustainable consumption pertains to both individual and collective attitudes and practices.

At the individual level, issues such as food waste within households or health concerns are fundamental. In contrast, at the collective level, the sustainability of services (whether public services like canteens or hospitals, or private services such as community-supported agriculture – CSA) and food markets (locality, proximity, or seasonality of the food purchased) become of significant importance. By linking individual and collective perspectives, the role of the State (for example, in terms of regulation and education) and the dimension of responsibility (whether it falls on the consumer, producer, or retailer) are also significant areas in the diverse and complementary approaches developed in this book.

Moreover, this perspective touches on an aspect that bridges methodology and ethics, since even when we (researchers) focus on practices, we cannot be certain that the observed practices reflect the central values or meanings of the actor, namely the informant. Inspired by Edgar Morin’s writings on ‘complex thinking’ [La pensée complexe] (Morin, 2008), this book adopts a holistic approach that offers an all-inclusive perspective that fits perfectly with consumption – highlighting the multidimensional nature of our everyday actions, shaped by both routines and changes, encompassing the automatic, the spontaneous, and the reflective. It reminds us that nothing is simple, that all we do is interconnected, and that contradictions between our words and actions are just a part of being human. The concept of ‘complex thinking’ helps us to recognise eating practices as a complex network of interpersonal relationships, where systems, families, objects, individuals, situations, and time – along with regulations, markets, and infrastructures – play essential roles.

It also highlights the role of the researcher, whose questions, presence, and gaze can alter the studied landscape. Finally, it underscores that what we neither see nor hear is also part of the study (Watzlawick, 1976). In other words, we aim to blend a critical realistic approach, acknowledging that changes and greater respect for the environment are real conditions for human survival, and an epistemological constructivism, admitting that our results are constructed by us, the researchers, and that ‘no such construction can claim to have absolute truth’ (Maxwell, 2012, p. 43). For instance, a person who mentions a local product by explaining why they favour short supply chains is not merely stating a fact: they are constructing an image of

themselves as an engaged consumer, concerned about quality, social connection, and ethics. This image is situated within a broader dialogue, where the researcher acts as an interlocutor, possibly a mirror, and where identity is crafted in tension between personal experience, organised speech, and reception by others.

Thus, the analysis of narrative fragments from interviews and everyday life is not merely data collection, but an attentive reading of the processes of narration and recognition that reveal the multiple facets of the self in motion. This method, inspired by Ricœur, invites us to see in each narrative a form of situated dialogue, where meaning and identity are woven together in a living interaction. Ricœur proposes that narrative allows disparate elements to be held together and gives meaning to complex experiences (Ricœur, 1984–1988). This also applies to research, where the narratives of participants, the observations of researchers, and the social and environmental contexts must be integrated into a coherent analysis.

By combining the works of Ricœur with those of Watzlawick and Morin, we can consider the role of the researcher as that of a reflexive narrator, aware of the limits of their position and the impact of their gaze on the landscape being studied. A narrative approach not only allows us to go beyond mere data collection to explore the profound meanings and tensions underlying the practices studied, but also to transform our understanding of the world by 'refiguring' it – adding our own experience as readers or narrators. Inviting researchers, as well as readers, to reflect on their positionality and acknowledge their influence on the co-construction of knowledge, we focus on the narrative process, described by Ricœur as identity-shaping² (Ricœur, 2015). This approach aligns with Bourdieu's thoughts about objectification of the objectifying subject (Bourdieu 1992, p.169) while the use of 'complex thinking' allows the authors to recognise the multidimensional and interconnected nature of eating practices, highlighting how individual, collective, and systemic levels interact.

*To tell oneself is always already to refigure oneself*⁶

Thus the base of the triangle rests on the importance of narrative as a central concept in qualitative research on food consumption, in general, and in this work, in particular. Suppose the narrative was the leitmotif and Paul Ricœur the guiding thread. The narrative is not merely a literary form or a mode of communication; it constitutes a way of understanding the world and oneself. As suggested by Ricœur, to tell is not only to interpret but also to understand and reconfigure oneself. Through narratives, individuals continuously shape their identity in dialogue with others and with themselves. For in telling, one tells oneself, to the other and oneself. By adopting this perspective, research transcends the mere measurement of behaviours to become a quest for lived meaning, where consumption practices emerge as fragments of life stories, carrying memories, values, and identity. The notions of memory and identity are particularly stressed here, as, for Ricœur, narrative articulates the way we perceive time – through the events we experience (the past including memory but also what we have forgotten or do not want to remember), the actions we take (the present), and the intentions we project (the

future) – into something that makes sense. Thus, personal identity is not fixed but constructed and understood through the narratives we tell about ourselves (narrative identity). Self-reflection and interaction with other people, ideas, or things also contribute to building the story, for both informants, researchers, and readers.

Given that Ricœur's works rest on demanding philosophical notions, one might point out that our informants rarely produce long linear narratives. Furthermore, in this work, for practical and academic reasons (because, regrettably, long quotations, although helpful and relevant, are not particularly appreciated in scholarly works, unless you are Bruno Latour), we often present brief quotes, anecdotes, or even spontaneous value judgements. However, be it dialogues, fragments of phrases, or micro-narratives, the narrative is at work. For Paul Ricœur, to narrate is not just to produce a long narration, but already to weave elements of life into a plot, articulating fragments into a possible totality. It is precisely in these fragments that we capture the hesitations, the fluctuations of identity, the values in tension, and the attempts at coherence that each informant constructs when speaking about what they consume. Thus, the analysis of consumption practices through the words of consumers implies taking small narratives and isolated quotes seriously as small parts of narrative subjectivity.

The narrative identity and the triple mimesis of Ricœur

In *Oneself as Another* (Ricœur, 2015), Ricœur introduces the concept of narrative identity, emphasising that personal identity is constructed and understood through the narratives we tell about ourselves. Those narratives emerge from a tension between identity 'idem' (which is more focused on the past, on stability, and the repetition of behaviours) and identity 'ipse' (dynamic, looking toward the future, involving a desire for change and the capacity to promise oneself something different). The present exists in the in-between, in the tension between 'idem' and 'ipse,' as we negotiate between who we have been, who we are, and who we aspire to become.

The concept of narrative identity refers to an identity constructed through experiences, articulated in words and actions. It is through storytelling—describing what we have lived, are living, and anticipate living—that identity is continuously shaped. This self-definition is dynamic, allowing us to reinterpret and retell our stories depending on time and context. Thus, an informant may express a tension between what they do and what they would like to do at a given time. Narrative identity is always becoming, between continuity and change, produced in the very act of narration that unfolds in three levels of mimesis:

1. Mimesis I (Prefiguration): corresponds to the understanding of the world before the narrative, shaped by habits, social practices, and cultural norms. For example, in chapter 4 an informant says, "I buy organic because it's better for my children's health," reflecting preexisting beliefs and practices
2. Mimesis II (Configuration): Another stage where lived experiences are narrated and organised into coherent stories. When Charles tells us he used to

shop at the supermarket, but now go to the market, highlighting a transformation. And

3. Mimesis III (Refiguration): involving an interpretation, where narratives are reconfigured to create coherence, as changes in habits are understood as attempts to construct a more coherent self-image. I.e. Charles supporting local producers.

Narrative identity is not a unified autobiography but a situated practice through which individuals position themselves, often in dialogue with others, e.g. speaking to researchers. Ricœur's framework shows how even fragmented stories create coherence, enabling individuals to justify, recognise, or protect themselves, but also stimulating changes.

Thus shaping a narrative identity is less about recounting a life than composing a moment in which one recognises oneself in what one says; a moment of exchange with the other (for example, the researcher or family members in the household) in which our actions are connected and justified (as the researcher often stimulates a need for justification). It is essential to reiterate that the narrator operates from a given place and moment (during ethnographic fieldwork or an interview), caught up in expectations, social constraints, and sometimes even a form of vulnerability or defensive strategy. For Ricœur, identity is never fixed: it is narratively mediated, always in motion between permanence and transformation, between what we have been and what we strive to be in relation to the other.

A situated dialogue

In *Time and Narrative* Ricœur considers the narrative as a path to structure the events of our life, a sort of dynamic link between lived time and experiences. The concept of narrative identity is not limited to the creation of narratives but highlights the impact of the narrative as a tool for transforming our understanding of the world. In *Oneself as Another*, he delves deeper into the notion of narrative identity, emphasising the dialogical and ethical dimension. The narrative is an act of shared creation – a space of co-construction between oneself and others. It is in constant movement, influenced and reshaped by dialogues, discussions, information, logos, anecdotes, and everything that comes from outside. As emphasised in the sixth study in *The Self and Narrative Identity* (Ricœur, 2015), these interactions allow us to connect with others, through mutual recognition, to 'refigure' our lived experiences by integrating new perspectives into the identity we construct (this point will be developed more thoroughly in Chapter 13).

As Ricoeur put it: 'Narrative identity is not a monologue but a dialogue. [...] To tell oneself is not only to expose oneself to oneself, but also to the reception by another.'⁴ We propose the notion of 'situated dialogue' to underscore the interactional and contextual nature of speech, as well as the polyphonic dimension in fieldwork: the subject speaks to themselves while addressing the researcher in a given situation. The mimesis emphasises that situated dialogue is a circular process; a process in which speech is formed, organised, and received *within* a specific

context (one or another situation where food is told or consumed). Particularly, Mimesis II highlights that the narratives of our informants are not just transcriptions but a living and active creation of meaning in exchange with others (the researcher, the listener). Narrative comes out at a given time in a given place, where time and place also are constitutive elements of the narrative. Thus, in a situated dialogue, narrative identity is both a product and a producer of the mimetic process.

When Ricœur meets Thévenot⁵ – a path to the ethical dimension

We agree that consumption narratives, even if fragmentary, are places of self-expression and spaces for shaping experience. As Butler points out, we do not tell our stories autonomously. ‘The account is an act – situated within a larger practice of acts – that one performs for, to, even on another, an allocutory deed, an acting for, and in the face of the other and sometimes by the language provided by the other.’ (Butler, 2005, p. 130). This is so especially in the case of a qualitative study, where the narrative builds in response to a request from the researcher. This implies a need to justify oneself, stimulating, more or less explicitly, the ethical dimension of the story. This is particularly the case where Thévenot’s regimes of engagement (Thévenot, 2006) enrich the narrative analysis inspired by Ricœur, perhaps more specifically in Mimesis II and III. By blending Ricœur and Thévenot, we can interpret qualitative data – such as quotes, micro-narratives, and everyday justifications – as living samples of situated narrative identity.

The narrative approach allows us to make sense of individual trajectories and tensions. At the same time, the theory of regimes of engagement helps us to understand the concrete modes of relationship to objects, norms, and others. Thus, studying the consumer through their narratives becomes a more nuanced understanding of their inscription in the world, where consumption is never purely functional but always involves multiple engagements (affective, normative, and routine) are articulated in the narrative. For Ricœur, narrative identity is the attempt to construct a continuity of self over time, considering ruptures, choices, and conflicts. The regimes of engagement, on the other hand, enable us to map out the ways of inhabiting this identity through concrete acts of practical engagement or ways of being in the world.

Ricœur and Thévenot meet thus on the ethical, relational, and agency dimensions. Ethics is both a driving force and a framework for actions and relationships within Thévenot’s regimes of engagement. It structures justifications in public contexts, guides explorations in innovative situations, and permeates daily practices in familiar contexts. Ricœur writes about ‘The Self and the Ethical Aim’ in the eighth study in *The Self and Narrative Identity* (Ricœur, 2015), speaking about ‘moral imputation.’ To tell your story is to take responsibility for your actions. Thus, narration engages in an ethical obligation.

On the one hand, Thévenot writes: ‘Our analysis of a plurality of action regimes invites us to conceive the identity not as something solely characterised, but as something composed and recomposed through multiple engagements. This layering gives a dynamic consistency to the individual’⁶ (Thévenot, 2006, p. 48). He

demonstrates, by highlighting the tensions and compromises between regimes, that ethics is not univocal but adapts to contexts and modes of engagement, thereby reflecting the complexity of human relationships to the world. On the other hand, Ricœur says: 'Actions involve *goals* whose anticipation does not align perfectly with the predicted or expected outcome but instead engages the individual upon whom the action depends'⁷ (Ricœur, 1983, p. 109). The joint analysis would therefore underscore how consumption narratives are also narratives of arbitration between different registers of attachment, justification, and routine (here just a nod to a theoretical approach we present in Chapter 3).

The bridge – a mediation between saying and doing

The final conceptual pillar of this reflection is that of the bridge, as developed by Michel Serres in his work on the art of bridges (Serres, 2013). This concept of the bridge, rich in metaphors and meanings, indeed embodies the idea of a connection between two dimensions often perceived as disjointed, such as the 'doing' (doings) and the 'saying' (sayings). The bridge thus becomes a symbolic and material structure that connects disparate elements, whether they are two ideas, two practices, or even an idea and an action. It is not simply a passage, but a space of mediation, a place where meanings emerge and relationships are woven.

In the context of narration, the bridge takes on a particular form: it becomes the narrative itself. The story that one tells the researcher, or that the researcher collects from a participant, acts as a bridge between what one thinks and what one does. This 'narrative bridge' is constructed through words, accounts, reflections, as well as the gestures and the things that the researcher observes. Narration goes far beyond words in ethnographic fieldwork. The 'narrative bridge' we speak about here is akin to the *in-between*, a space of transition and transformation. It allows for linking spoken expressions to bodily expressions, as well as to what lies between them. Conversely, the 'narrative bridge' seems quite tangible. It materialises in the form of a story, carried by the weight of information, knowledge, experiences, and words. It is both a tool for communication and a space for reflection, where individual practices find coherence and meaning. It is a bridge that gives meaning to practice by linking intentions to actions.

However, Michel Serres invites us to envision the bridge not as a fixed structure, but as a dynamic element. It can be a turning bridge or a raising bridge, one that must move to let a boat pass. This image emphasises that the 'narrative bridge' is not static; it adapts, transforms, and evolves according to context and need. Similarly, the stories we construct are in a state of perpetual motion. They are never definitive, but always open to new interpretations and new meanings.

This shifting nature of the bridge invites us to explore concepts through negotiation and movement as well. On the one hand, concepts are not predetermined but instead forms in motion that are constantly negotiated and transformed (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). On the other hand, a narrative always involves a negotiation between what is said and what is left unsaid, between what is perceived and what

is interpreted. The ‘narrative bridge’ then becomes a space of dialogue, where tensions between different perspectives can be explored and resolved.

The narrative bridge not only connects existing elements but also transforms what it connects. By making a statement, we do not simply describe a reality; we reconfigure it, giving it new meaning. This process of transformation is essential for understanding human practices, whether they involve consumption, work, or social relationships. Thus, the narrative bridge becomes a tool for exploring the complex dynamics between thought, word, and action. For Ricœur, narrative is both individual and collective. It serves as a bridge between personal identity and shared memory, allowing individuals and communities to make sense of their experiences, construct meaning, and engage with the world. The dynamic interplay between these dimensions highlights the transformative power of narrative in shaping both selfhood and society.

We will keep in mind the image of the narrative bridge as a space of transition, negotiation, and transformation in the remainder of this chapter, which focuses on the definitions, or rather the delimitations, of the main concepts used in this work.

Main empirical concepts: between delimitations and negotiations

On one side, some concepts are purely ‘emic,’ meaning they come directly from the field, and their definition depends solely on how participants express them, or not. On the other hand, we need ‘etic’ notions, defined by researchers, to structure our work, whether during project preparation, the development of methodological guidelines, or the analytical phase. These notions, presented and defined below, were rarely used during fieldwork, either by researchers or by consumers, as our informants say and do, but they do not necessarily describe their actions with concepts. However, our wish is to create a space where negotiation and movement can occur, exploring the tension between ‘etic’ and ‘emic perspectives (the former resulting from the researcher’s analysis while the latter emerging from fieldwork).’ Following Deleuze, we wish to focus here not on a pre-established definition, but on what happens ‘in between’. The negotiation of concepts (Dolphijn & Amilien, 2020) offers a dynamic approach enabling us to view concepts as a network, as we engage with informants in dialogue, discussions, thoughts, observations, and, presumably, but also as you, reader, progress through this book. Thus, each concept does not have a prior fixed meaning, or even a single interpretation. However, it evolves in relation to other concepts, in encounters with other people, and in reflection on oneself. This journey of understanding is definitely guided by the narrative bridge - both an analytical tool and a space for creativity - allowing us to explore the complexity and richness of food practices in all their depth.

Let us turn our attention to key empirical concepts which guided the wording of this volume’s title. From there, we move to more practical notions, such as local food and food quality, and eventually explore (in Annexe A) other terms deeply tied to market economics and agricultural policy. These concepts were at the heart of the Strength2Food project, and through this volume, we hope the reader would discover new layers of meaning within them.

Two key empirical concepts: sustainable food and everyday food practices

Sustainable food

Paraphrasing Bruntland's *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development* (UN et al. 1987), launched in 1987, we would open this introduction with a quasi-quote (with the word 'development' in the original text having been replaced with the word 'consumption'):

Humanity has the ability to make **consumption** [development] sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development does imply limits – not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities.

(UN et al., 1987, p.24 part 3, paragraph 27)

The concept of sustainability emerged increasingly in public discourses with *Our Common Future*, a groundbreaking report which outlined the fundamental principles for a desired future global development. Since then, we have observed a growing awareness of the environmental impacts of food production. In their recent book, Skjerven and her colleagues demonstrate how the term 'sustainability' is often used for demagogic purposes, legitimizing commercial or political actions (Skjerven, A. et al., 2025). It has become an empty buzzword, employed to justify consumerist practices under the guise of ecological responsibility. The narratives presented in this volume invite the reader to adopt an open, reflective, and critical perspective on everyday food consumption practices, challenging such instrumentalization. Despite blatant greenwashing and its ambivalent meaning, we decided to keep the concept for both practical and strategical reasons, and we consider here sustainable food consumption as *food practices and responsible choices recognising the limits of resources and taking into consideration both personal and collective needs, one's own body, and the environment*.

Consumption

Consumption is here seen as a complex field of action, shaped by diverse practices, where people do more than acquire things - they express attitudes, preferences, belonging, values, and tastes. To explore consumption practices rooted in cultural habits and values, we consider in this book the processes (reduced to 4 main phases: plan, purchase, use, and dispose) through which consumers acquire and use products, as well as the cultural and structural frameworks that shape their actions, influenced by specific historical, geographical, and political contexts.

Our approach embraces a holistic understanding of "using" and "consuming," positioned between two dominant perspectives in consumption studies. On one hand, the European Sociological Association emphasizes consumption as a social

construction, shaped by institutions, hierarchies, and power dynamics, focusing on social inequalities, practices - as carriers of habits-, and global processes (e.g., Southerton, 2020; Evans, 2019; Warde, 2017). On the other hand, Consumer Culture Theory, rooted in marketing and post-structuralism (e.g., Arnould et al., 2023; Arnould & Thompson, 2008; Askegaard et al., 2005), views consumption culture as a system of meanings, where individuals use goods and practices to express identity and values while negotiating social relationships.

Everyday food practices

Everyday food practices may appear mundane but are deeply ingrained in our habits, education, and culture. For instance, buying vegetables from the market, or from the supermarket, and cooking or frying them, may appear mundane – yet this act reveals a multitude of social worlds. These practices reflect how we inhabit the world. Eating is never a neutral act; it serves as a subtle reflection of our personal tastes, values, and social norms a multifaceted construct referred to as ‘food culture’ in this book. Focusing on everyday food practices means here concentrating on the routine actions and decisions related to planning, purchasing, preparing, eating together – or alone – and managing leftovers. These practices are influenced by socio-cultural, economic, political, and environmental factors, and thus reflect individual and collective values related to sustainability.

Practice

In the concept of everyday food practices, the notion of practice is central. A practice can be defined broadly as a set of routinised actions that involve skills, material objects, and shared meanings. It differs from a habit, which is more individualised and often refers to repetitive and largely unconscious behaviour resulting from personal experience or routine. A practice, by contrast, is embedded within a collective and social framework.

A practice is never a mere action; it is the very fabric of everyday life. For Pierre Bourdieu, to practice is to enact an embodied world: we as individuals act with an instinct for how things work, shaped by our experience and an inherited, often unconscious, habitus (Bourdieu, 1980). Eating practices function as a space where the value of our ways of doing is tested and expressed (using the example of buying organic tomatoes and conventional tomatoes, which underlines a social meaning) (Bourdieu, 1979). Michel de Certeau, on the other hand, examines the margins (Certeau et al., 1994). Eating practices are the art of adapting and ‘bricoler’ [making do] in everyday life. Behind the most ordinary gestures (cooking tomatoes one way or another) lies an invisible yet meaningful tactic that reclaims agency in the mundane.

In this book, we willingly adopt a perspective inspired by Social Practice Theory, which shifts attention from individual responsibility to the systemic and collective dimensions of food consumption. Social Practice Theory emphasises how these practices are socially embedded and shaped by the interaction of materials, skills,

and meanings, and to what extent individuals embody them (see Chapter 3 for the theoretical approach).

Two examples of central practical concepts related to the quality and sustainable turn in food consumption

Before the fieldwork, we had developed a structured categorisation which provided both researchers and informants with a clear framework for understanding the various types of food quality schemes and related concepts, as well as their relevance to consumer practices and perceptions. This prefiguration (Mimesis I) concerned Geographical Indications (GIs), including Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG), Local or Regional Products, Organic Products, Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs), Private Quality Labels and Brands, as well as Logos (see Annex A here under for your information). As previously announced, we will focus here on the movement and the negotiation process (Mimesis III).

Local food

We will begin with the example of the concept of local products, for which the literature lacks a common agreement and definition (Feldmann & Hamm, 2015). Dividing into three main categories allows for the recognition of the difference between emic and etic uses of local food as well as cultural or national differences (Amilien, 2011; Amilien et al., 2008): 1) food grown and sold locally (for example, in the UK, a 'local food product' is generally considered to be produced within 30 to 100 miles (approximately 50 to 160 kilometres) of its point of sale, although definitions may vary depending on the context); 2) localised food products marketed outside their region of origin (such as well-known regional products); and 3) products of terroir or GIs. Consumers generally appreciate local food – without precisely defining the concept – for its freshness, health benefits, and traceability. However, they also value its role in supporting the local economy, biodiversity, animal welfare, and resilience, though its value depends on the specific context of the product and its place of origin (Brunori et al., 2016; Kneafsey et al., 2013; Schmitt et al., 2017).

An example of negotiation regarding food origin and locality in 'local food' comes from Norwegian households participating in the Strength2Food study: Norwegian products bearing a national quality label (in a country stretching over 1,500 km from north to south) were generally perceived as 'local.' This local feature, however, had nothing to do with distance travelled, as carrots produced in Norway may have travelled further than imported Danish or Swedish carrots. Locality appears to be linked to the country of origin, not to the nearby place of production. A difference in the translation and understanding of the concept of local product was noted between Norwegian consumers, authorities, producers, and other stakeholders. The meaning of local product shifts and adapts. It changes over time and among stakeholders. It is negotiated. This can be problematic

because, if there is no relatively common understanding of what is meant by ‘local product,’ it is difficult to reach an agreement. However, too strict a definition might seem exclusionary. Thus, negotiating the concept with an open approach and constructive dialogue seems the way forward. In this book, although we present precise delimitations based on research, we will be exceptionally open to the words used by our informants, to fieldwork-based expressions, and the negotiation of key concepts.

Food Quality Schemes

Another key concept in this book is Food Quality Schemes (FQS), which is completely *etic* and relatively unknown to our informants. The simple definition – since it follows the rules of the European Union and refers to recognised and legalised quality labels – would be all food quality schemes (e.g., regional, national, EU, international) that our participants use or speak about, including the EU official GIs and traditional specialities, such as the PDO, the PGI, and the TSG. Those technical terms are principally used by the researchers, and one of the results of the S2F study is precisely the low recognition of this type of designation by consumers. Nevertheless, we also observed here the need for some negotiation, since many consumers amalgamate the different types of designation of origin or geographical indications under the general term of ‘protected products.’

Quality food – negotiations, hierarchy, and trust

Several informants emphasise a key element regarding labelling and knowledge: it is not enough to acquire information about a new label or brand, but it is also important to develop familiarity with it and establish a form of ‘relationship.’ Thus, there is a difference between recognising a label and actually using it as a guide when shopping in stores. In several cases, the connection with a brand that people trust seemed deeper than simply the organic or local value of the products themselves.

Price plays a central role in organic foods (e.g., Chapter 5), but other values are also important in their evaluation (e.g., Chapter 6). In Norway, for example, imported organic products, which are perceived to have a high carbon footprint due to their ‘global’ transportation, are often considered less valuable than Norwegian products. For instance, organic labels on imported products, such as Spanish organic carrots, are sometimes judged as potentially ‘unsustainable.’ This highlights a fluid hierarchy between organic, local, and price. Organic can be the most important value, but not always. Although informants cite organic as the most important factor in their food sourcing, they are also concerned about local foods, ethical considerations, and environmental sustainability. Consequently, Spanish organic carrots were perceived as less valuable than conventional Norwegian carrots. While foreign certified labels, such as the EU organic label, do not inspire as much trust as the Norwegian certification and are not often consulted when purchasing food, the private label *Änglamark* (which is organic) is well known, actively used, recognised, and appreciated by our informants.

This perspective highlights both the complexity and the constant need for negotiation of concepts within a kind of hierarchy of choices.

Before delving into the methodology in Chapter 2, let's conclude this chapter with a summary. Unlike earlier approaches that often examined consumption in isolation or through rigid frameworks, our conceptual framework, rooted in narratives, views food practices as interconnected systems shaped by personal identities, collective norms, self-reflection, and societal structures. The narrative approach developed by Ricœur reveals that individuals weave the meaning of their existence through narrative, emphasising that everyday consumption practices, far from being mere functional acts, are embedded in this intriguing story that shapes their history. By integrating 'narrative identity,' 'complex thought,' and 'regimes of engagement,' we explore how individuals shape and reshape their sense of self through storytelling, while also uncovering a wealth of lived experiences. This perspective highlights the tensions, contradictions, and ethical challenges embedded in food practices, which the chapters of this volume will bring to light. We also reflected on the empirical concepts examined in this volume, such as sustainability and local food, and their role in shaping our understanding of food practices. While several concepts are outlined in Annex A to clarify references, we argue that the meaning of these concepts will naturally unfold as the reader engages with the pages of this volume. In this way, the concepts are not merely predefined but take shape through the narratives and discussions presented throughout the book.

Annexe A

Prefiguration - mimesis I

FOOD QUALITY SCHEMES (FQS)

Food Quality Schemes (FQS) encompass all quality certification systems related to food, whether regional, national, EU-based, or international, that are referenced or used by our participants. This includes official EU Geographical Indications (GIs) and traditional specialities, such as the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), the Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), and the Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG). For the purposes of this study, we distinguish four main categories of FQS:

- a. Geographical Indications (GIs): PDO and PGI

Geographical Indications (GIs) are origin- and tradition-based quality labels, including PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) and PGI (Protected Geographical Indication). While GIs have a long history, their presence in the global agrifood market has grown significantly over the past 25 years (Raustiala & Munzer, 2007). Producers' groups responsible for establishing, regulating, and governing the use of these GIs operate in diverse forms. In Europe, PDOs and PGIs, along with their supporting producer groups, are regulated under a common EU policy framework and European law (Marette, Clemens, & Babcock, 2008). PDO: Products with a PDO label must be "produced, processed, and prepared within a specific geographical area using recognized know-how."

PGI: Products with a PGI label must demonstrate a geographical link in at least one stage of production, processing, or preparation. Additionally, the product benefits from a recognized reputation tied to its origin.

- b. Traditional Products (TSG)

Traditional Speciality Guaranteed (TSG) labels, as defined by Regulation (EU) No. 1151/2012, highlight the traditional character of a product, whether in its composition, production methods, or recipe. Unlike PDO and PGI, TSG does not refer to the product's geographical origin. To qualify, the tradition must be well-documented for at least 25 years. While most traditional products are crafted using recipes passed down locally for generations, tradition is understood as both a state and a process, allowing room for innovation.

- c. Local or Regional Products

Local or regional products are those with a strong geographical anchorage, often perceived as more authentic than products from distant locations. However, these products do not necessarily fall under an official FQS certification. Their value lies in their connection to a specific place and the authenticity this implies.

- d. Organic Products

Organic products refer to food items produced using ecological methods that respect natural cycles, avoid pesticides and additives harmful to the soil or human health, and promote biodiversity. This category includes both certified organic products, which display official bio labels, and non-certified organic products that consumers trust to have been produced in an environmentally friendly way.

Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs)

In accordance with Regulation (EU) No. 1305/2013 and the work conducted in Work Package 7 of the Strength2Food project, Short Food Supply Chains (SFSCs) are defined as "supply chains involving a limited number of economic operators, committed to cooperation, local economic development, and fostering close geographical and social relationships between producers, processors, and consumers."

Private Quality Labels and Brands

Private quality labels refer to certifications or quality stamps created and used by private entities, such as supermarket brands or specific producers. These labels are often used to signify quality or specific attributes of the food, as determined by the distributor or producer.

Logo

A logo is the graphic symbol used to represent a quality label visually. It serves as a recognisable marker for consumers to identify the certification or quality associated with a product.

Notes

- 1 The main parts of this chapter have been first written in French by the author, then translated with Grammarly (a platform using artificial intelligence for English writing and copy editing) and lastly adapted / edited back to keep the original meaning.
- 2 OpenAI translation: 'Narrative identity is the identity of a character who constructs themselves over time through narrative. It is through the mediation of emplotment that the subject can hold together the diversity of events in their life and thus understand themselves.' The French original reads: 'L'identité narrative, c'est l'identité d'un personnage qui se construit dans le temps par le récit. C'est par la médiation de la mise en intrigue que le sujet peut faire tenir ensemble la diversité des événements de sa vie, et ainsi se comprendre lui-même.' Ricœur, P. in *Soi-même comme un autre* (2015, p. 334).
- 3 Ricœur, P. *Temps et récit – Le Temps raconté* (Vol. 3) (1991).
- 4 OpenAI translation of: 'L'identité narrative n'est pas un monologue mais un dialogue Se raconter, c'est non seulement s'exposer à soi-même, mais aussi à la réception d'un autre.' Ricœur, P. in *Soi-même comme un autre* (2015, p. 124).
- 5 As Thévenot already met Ricœur, in la revue Esprit. (Dosse et al. 2006). 'L'effet Ricoeur dans les sciences humaines.'
- 6 OpenAI translation – with slight changes – of: 'Notre analyse d'une pluralité de régime d'action invite à concevoir une identité qui n'est pas seulement caractérisée, mais composée et recomposée à partir d'engagements multiples dont le feuilletage confère une consistance dynamique à la personne.' Thévenot (2006, p. 48).
- 7 OpenAI translation of: 'Les actions impliquent des *buts* dont l'anticipation ne se confond pas avec le résultat prévu ou prédit, mais engage celui dont l'action dépend.' Ricœur, P. *Temps et récit - l'intrigue et le récit historique* (Vol. 1) (1983).

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2 A deeper taste of everyday food culture based on an ethnographic approach

Gun Roos and Virginie Amilien

Introduction

The main methodologies used in the research presented in this book are qualitative. They include, among others, ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews, desk research, and video filming. In this chapter, we mainly use examples from the fieldwork we conducted in Norway as part of the Strength2Food project, and we introduce a recipe for an ethnographic approach to gaining a deeper taste of everyday food culture. The ethnographic approach is especially useful for observing and capturing everyday food consumption and culture because it is often tacit, based on routines, and practiced in an unconscious manner.

All the chapters in Part 1 of this book are based on the ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the context of the H2020 EU-funded project, Strength2Food, during the period 2017–2018. The main aim of the ethnographic approach was to collect descriptive information about households' everyday food consumption practices (Figure 2.1 summarises the methodological phases). Inspired by the wardrobe studies (Klepp & Bjerck, 2014), our own kitchen project (Amilien et al., 2003) as well as Hand and Shove's kitchen studies (Hand & Shove, 2004), the Kitchen Life study (Dickinson et al., 2014), the intelligent kitchen project (Wathelet & Julien, 2013), as well as more recent and more general studies (Gojard & Veron, 2018 and Lareau & Rao, 2016) we decided to observe eaters at home, in different settings, and in different seasons. The purpose of the Strength2Food project was to better understand the use or non-use of quality food products (Food Quality Schemes [FQS], short food supply chains [SFSC], organic or local food), and how informants plan to buy, purchase, use, and dispose of food. But to do so and to be open to food routines and everyday actions and words at home, without specifically emphasising the subject of the study to the participants, we needed to take a more general approach and thus focused on everyday food consumption. Finally, we have developed a multifaceted recipe based on an ethnographic approach that we present in this chapter.

Ethnographic approach

Ethnographic approaches, historically rooted in anthropology and now used across social sciences, are a way of exploring how members of a society see their social interactions, practices, and understandings of everyday life through observations

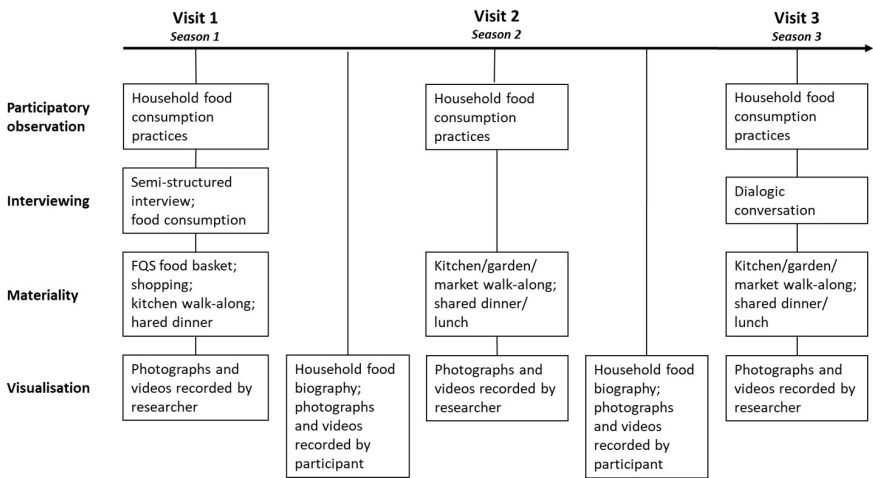


Figure 2.1 Timeline with a summary of ethnographic methods and fieldwork. This table summarises visually what the researchers did at the different visits.

in situations over a long time frame. Following Côté and Gratton, this involves understanding:

the meaning that individuals, in the same situation, the same group, give to the events and situations of their daily life; research attempts to understand by what processes and in what circumstances the meaning or representation of a given situation is constructed, like all the emotional experience that emerges from it.

(Côté & Gratton, 2014, p. 55)

Emphasis is placed on exploring ‘the native point of view,’ i.e., how members of a society see their society, rather than only reporting what the researcher sees. Participant observation, which can be described as ‘the situation that makes our work possible’ (Agar, 1982, p. 792), is central to ethnography. Agar adds that it is ‘Through participant observation, we gain access to the flow of life’ and observe parts that can be abstracted for reflection purposes (Agar, 1982, p.792). The researchers endeavour to experience the life of participants with as much depth as possible. However, they are aware that their view of reality is neither an objective one nor ‘the truth.’ Based on a constructivist way of thinking, we recognise that researchers cannot forget their respective perceptions or feelings during participant observation. Participant observation is a strategy that facilitates data collection in the field, where subjectivity is not only a reality but part of the fieldwork. Thus, the researchers become instruments for both data collection and analysis through their own experience.

The ethnographic approach in the first part of this book is built on three complementary aims: 1) to shed light on how European consumers understand, perceive,

value, and trust EU/national/regional food quality labels and labelled products, and how they could contribute to sustainability; with 2) a special emphasis on achieving a better understanding of discrepancies between consumers' stated values and their actual food consumption practices, including planning, purchasing, using/cooking/eating, and disposing of food; and 3) to investigate consumers' perceptions and wishes with regards to additional or adjusted policy measures.

Although not addressing product development, ethnography was used as:

a way of understanding the particulars of daily life in such a way as to increase the success probability of a new product or service or, more appropriately, to reduce the likelihood of failure specifically due to a lack of understanding of the basic behaviours and frameworks of consumers.

(Salvador et al., 1999, p. 37)

The ethnographic fieldwork (Figure 2.1) combined several interactive methods that included both performativity and materiality – participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and dialogic conversation – and visualisation – photography, and video recording. The participatory and visual methods were used to reveal tacit household food practices that may strengthen sustainability, although they are not necessarily driven by awareness.

The ethnographic approach focused on 'being naïve' and open-minded, like a 'new' recruit or a child, in addition to using reflexivity. The researcher conducted research with the household and took part in people's everyday lives, observing what happened, listening to what was said, asking questions, and participating in activities. Our objective was 'to be there,' to experience and do food-related things together with the households (e.g., shopping for, cooking, and eating food), paying specific attention to what the participants were or were not doing. It was a direct and first-hand engagement in which observation and participation were key elements. The constant tension between passive and active engagement created moments – like in discussions or when we were told about a recipe – where we were more observing than participating, while, at other times, as in dialogues or while making food together, we were more participating than observing. To mitigate this bias and increase the chances of combining participation and observation in the data, we were always two researchers during the visits.

The plan was thus, through observation and participation in everyday life and food practices, to achieve a better understanding of the use or non-use of quality food products (including FQS, short food supply chain, organic and local food) and how informants 'consume food' in daily life, that is to say how they plan, buy, use (prepare, cook, eat etc.) and dispose of food. The researchers, working in 7 different countries and with more than 40 different families, discovered ways of understanding, i.e., similarities and differences, everyday food-related practices, and how they were related to the food consumption context and dynamics of the household.

As part of the Strength2Food project, participant observation was performed in 41 families in 7 countries (France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Serbia, and

the UK). The selection of households was based on two main dimensions: stated involvement in quality food products (low to medium/medium to high – please note that this scale concerns self-declared involvement in local food, so the meaning of the concept of quality or local was adapted to the individual understanding); and type of area/place of residence (rural/suburban/urban). To ensure a mixed sample of households, some additional criteria, e.g., the age of adults and children, and ethnic background, were included. Each national research team used and adapted this model to recruit five to six households. Various recruitment approaches were used, including contacting people in food shops, via local organisations, flyers, posters, the internet, social media, articles in local newspapers, and personal networks. The households were recruited through snowball sampling. As an incentive, participating households received a tablet or a voucher of corresponding monetary value. This incentive was selected because households were asked to use a tablet or smartphone as a data collection tool. However, each team was free to offer incentives and solutions based on their institution's regulations.

A standard methodological protocol was developed to guide the data collection. Following a first introductory meeting in a public space – to avoid potential pressure on the participant – each household was visited by two researchers three times in different seasons to observe seasonal variations. We had only a few email exchanges between the visits, but by making several return visits, we could build rapport with participants and put them more at ease.

The participant observation involved researchers observing and to some degree also participating in the phases of food consumption (planning, purchasing, using/cooking/eating, and disposal of food). We usually participated in cooking dinner, and we consequently ate together with the family. In addition to visiting and observing the households in their homes and gardens, we went on walkalongs with them when they were purchasing food in supermarkets, grocery stores, and alternative food retail outlets, including food markets, organic shops, and farm shops. Video filming was used to document observations of practices, such as shopping together and making food together with members of a household. We invited the participants to give us a tour of their kitchen and to show us their utensils and food in the fridge, freezer, and cupboards. The focus was on documenting things and practices in their homes and kitchens where they usually prepare their meals and eat, and not necessarily to impact the habits, and to shed light on the participants' interest in and use of quality food.

The participating households also used food biographies to document their experiences and engagement in quality food products by taking notes, photos, and films using a tablet or smartphone. The households were given instructions for documentation during the first visit. They were asked to document the planning, purchasing, use/cooking/eating, and disposal of quality food products in the household. Participants were free to decide the format, content, and frequency of their documentation, but we asked them during each visit to choose 12 pictures/photos that were important to them on a given theme. The first series of photos should document the biography of family food during a week, while the second series focuses on the biography of a food product. Before the third visit, we specifically

asked them to choose and follow one or more food products with quality food labels and document in pictures, as well as with notes and in videos if they wanted, their ‘destiny’ and ‘use’ through the different consumption phases (planning, shopping, preparing, eating, and waste). The self-documentation and photos were used as the basis for discussion in later field visits.

Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews with participants about quality food products, sustainability, and consumption were coupled with participant observation during the first visit to each home. The interviews, which lasted for 30–90 minutes, focused on quality food products and everyday food practices. The aim was both to discuss concrete foods representing the project and to collect discursive and normative data on the perception and meaning of the use/non-use of FQS. The researchers also brought a food basket to the households containing a variety of quality foods (3–8 products labelled as FQS or local food), and the semi-structured interview started with a presentation of the food basket and asking the household to choose what they wanted to taste. After the food basket, the interview turned to more specific questions related to FQS labels and sustainability. The semi-structured interviews and conversations about the food basket functioned as icebreakers during the first visit to each home. Bringing along food baskets also offered an opportunity to touch, smell, and taste food products.

Dialogic conversations

Inspired by dialogism (Bakhtine, 1978) and notions of dialogic democracy (Callon et al., 2009), dialogic and self-reflexive conversations were introduced during the third visit to the households. The aim was to stimulate discussion and reflection on practices and the co-construction of knowledge. Before the third visit, we sent the participants transcripts of the semi-structured interviews recorded during the first visit, so that they could reflect on potential changes in consumption related to quality food products or a greater interest in food quality and sustainability because of being part of the study. Together with the participants, we went through the questions and answers from the first visit and reflected on possible changes in practices and knowledge. Inspired by mentoring programmes (Ekeland, 2014), the dialogic conversation is built on four complementary phases: retrospection, reflection, communication, and conversation. To stimulate the dialogic conversation, some of the households were also invited to sort cards with FQS and national labels during the last visit.

Desk research and other methods

Desk research, including the study of manuals, regulations, documentation, and mass media discourse, about the use of quality food provided insights into the historical and contemporary relationship between ideals and practices.

Ethnography of everyday food practices – from overview to guidelines?

A recipe for an ethnographic approach to gaining a deeper taste of families' everyday food culture and consumption.

Meeting and visiting families

Meeting in a public space: we suggest holding a first introductory meeting in a public space. We often met our potential participants in a café for the first time and informed them about the project and their role in it. If we received a positive answer, we asked them to sign a formal participation letter / consent form. We used the same letter in all countries, respecting EU law, etc.

First visit: as a first fieldwork step, we contacted the households and asked them to suggest a day that we could come and visit them and participate in everyday food shopping, cooking, and eating, and conduct a semi-structured interview. We tried to accommodate each household. For example, in one of the families with small children, we divided the first visit over two days because it was easier to schedule. The semi-structured interviews started with a presentation of a basket containing a variety of quality foods (Figure 2.2: Photo of food basket), and we asked the household to choose what they wanted to taste, and they got to keep the other foods as a gift. The family tasted the foods that they selected as we discussed and explored the foods together. The rest of the interview was devoted to more specific questions related to quality food labels and sustainability. We had also decided that two



Figure 2.2 Food basket with quality food products.

researchers would participate in each visit so that one of us could focus on video filming, but also as a safety precaution.

Second visit: the second household visit included a walkalong in the kitchen, garden, or food market and a shared lunch or dinner. For example, we arranged to meet one family at an annual food festival of Norwegian food products and beverages, and we walked and talked about food, and ended up tasting some of the products while looking at the photos that they had taken as documentation since the last visit. The aim was to visit the households in three different seasons because the availability of food and food culture is seasonal. For example, one of the households that we had visited the first time in March was visited for the second time in September.

Third visit: the third and last household visit followed the structure of the previous visits and featured a shared meal. In addition, the households had received the transcribed semi-structured interviews about FQS labels and sustainability beforehand, and this was used as the basis for a dialogic conversation about FQS and sustainability. We wished to hear from the households themselves whether their views were still the same or whether they thought that they had changed since the first visit.

Participant observation during visits – what are we speaking about?

We realised early in the planning of the project that only talking with people about food would not be enough to understand everyday practices better. We needed to get a deeper taste of the food culture, and limiting ourselves to methods like interviews or focus groups was not productive. We decided to adopt an ethnographic approach to be able to explore everyday food practices together with the members of the households and not limit ourselves to doing a study about, or of, our informants. We wished to participate in household food practices as well as observe people performing these practices in their natural setting. Because many food-related practices are tacit knowledge, we thought that participant observation could be helpful to achieve a deeper understanding. When our informants volunteered for the project, they were given information and knew that we would be visiting them to participate and observe. While planning the fieldwork, we had reflected that the households were perhaps not used to being observed in their everyday food practices and that it might be awkward to have us in their homes. As noticed previously, we were aware that being there would affect the practices, and we tried to accommodate the household. Therefore, we adapted our degree of participation and communication to each household to minimise the effect of our presence on their everyday food consumption. However, we felt that they welcomed us and seemed to be more relaxed and more at ease after the first visit – and even more after the second visit.

We used both video filming and photography to document food-related activities, the environment, and other matters in the participating households (Pink, 2007). To maximise the data-based observations during the Strength2Food project, both researchers and households participated in video filming and photography.

The researchers recorded the three visits with the households, using a video camera to collect data on household food practices. At the same time, informants were invited to film or take pictures of their own.

The first aim was to ensure that observations within the family were not biased as a result of our current mood or the general context. We therefore decided to film all visits and all sessions. So the video camera followed us when we were shopping, when we came home to unload the shopping bags, when we were preparing food, and when we were washing up. It was only at mealtimes that we stopped filming – but not necessarily the microphone – as video seemed superfluous and perhaps awkward in the social and relatively intimate setting of sharing food. There are therefore many hours of videos and audiotapes documenting what was done and what was said, showing facial expressions and gestures, but also showing empty or full cupboards containing dishware or grocery products, fridges and freezers, messy drawers or a tidy open shelf. One of the most striking aspects is undoubtedly the difference between ‘what we say and what we do.’ Even though we could have extensive discussions about the value of local products in a cuisine where everything comes from foreign countries, or, conversely, with someone who cooks local products without being especially attentive to the origin of the products, there were often differences between what informants say and what they do, and this is undoubtedly where ethnographic observation is most fascinating. This aspect has been further developed and analysed in Amilien et al. (2022), emphasising the strength of the ethnographic method when words and acts are contradicting, challenging, and complementing each other. Sennett’s words also throw some light on this tense and intimate duality between doing and saying: ‘In the higher stage of skill, there is a constant interplay between tacit knowledge and self-conscious awareness, the tacit knowledge serving as an anchor, the explicit awareness serving as critique and corrective’ (Sennett, 2008, p. 50).

Although video was our key tool in observation, we always had a notepad with us that reflected our feelings of the visit, our comments, and our personal translations of what we shared with the family on the day and in the place in question. Descriptive notes from observations of practices of planning, purchasing, using/cooking/eating, and disposal of food quality products supplemented the video recordings. Reading the notes several months or years later and confronting our memories leads to a very enriching reflection and interesting view of the fieldwork. This achieves the second aim of the video filming, which is to provide ‘visual memories’ of a place and time.

Actions and words: food sustainability as an example

The project focused on sustainability, and we asked the participants to tell us what they thought about sustainability and sustainable food. Most of the participants were not very interested in the topic and were not able to give us examples of sustainable food practices. Some of them even said that sustainability was a concept they did not like because it has been used and misused by politicians. However, when we were visiting the households, we could observe sustainable food practices,

such as how they saved food leftovers and used them, for example, as feed for hens. Everyday food practices were often more sustainable in families that did not speak directly about them but where traditional know-how or constraints such as economy or time played a major role in cooking and the choice of products. As we wished to be open to self-reflection by our informants, we also prepared a dialogic conversation for the last visit.

The dialogic conversation – an example of the difference between planning and practice in the research process

The dialogic conversations with informants aimed to ask about, observe, and discuss together the filmed and noted practices. This self-reflexive approach contained a study of the study itself and sought to reflect on practices through discussion with and feedback to the project actors (both informants and researchers). The aim was to better understand practices through common reflection and discussion, and to explore how researchers overcome cultural and disciplinary obstacles during the research process. (see Chapter 11 for more details)

This dialogic conversation was therefore an important part of the ethnographic approach, and it was not just introduced to conclude the visits in a formal and enriching way, but above all to stimulate self-reflection on the part of the informants, as well as a dialogue with the researcher on an equal footing. This is why we printed the transcribed first interview, which was several months old (between nine and 12 months in general), and sent it to the participants several weeks in advance so that we could discuss it during the third visit.

In reality, things turned out very differently from what we had planned. Most of our informants had not really taken the time to reread the first interview, and the discussion very quickly turned into a spontaneous and often engaged dialogue about the political aspect of food. We addressed the question of quality labels, on which we particularly insisted during this third visit. Still, it was often avoided and other subjects discussed instead, such as the food system in general, the environmental impact of ecological agriculture or conventional, national policies, or the globalised market and its role in distribution, etc.

Although the dialogic conversations did not necessarily take the form of an open dialogue on quality food schemes, they turned out to be enriching sessions. Most of the participants told us what they would have liked the authorities to offer them as regards information on nutrition, but we also collected innovative proposals to give consumers a voice through public dialogues or to intensify education on taste or food consumption in schools.

Biography of FQS

Another approach to everyday food practices was based on self-taken photographs that we called household food biography. Participants were asked to record and take photographs of foods and food practices. The self-documentation and photos were used as the basis for discussion during household visits.

The households were given instructions during the first field visit about taking pictures that reflected planning, purchasing, using/cooking/eating, and disposal of quality food products in the household. Informants were free to decide the format, the content, and the frequency of their documentation. Each season/visit, we proposed a given theme (first visit: about everyday food, but we emphasised that it would be nice to illustrate breakfast or lunch, and that we wanted them to choose 12 pictures that they believed to be ‘important’). During the second visit, we specified that we would like to have more data about a specific day of the week. Everything related to food could be documented on that day. They could take photos / make videos with the aim of following all food events, and items bought and consumed during that day. If possible, we asked them to choose a weekday, or, if not, a Saturday. During the third visit, we specifically asked them to follow the destiny of a particular FQS food item over a few weeks. We asked them to ‘play a game’ and follow one or two chosen food products (of their choosing) from beginning to end (i.e., from planning to buy a food item until putting food waste/packaging in the waste bin). They could choose up to two food items.

From the many photos taken, we finally asked our informants to choose only 12 pictures that were important to them. The self-documentation and photos were used as the basis for discussion during later field visits, and a selection of the photos taken by the household members and researchers was eventually shown in an online photo gallery (<https://www.strength2food.eu/food-practices-and-quality-labels-in-european-households-gallery/>).

A pathway to conclusion

This chapter offers a twofold approach to ethnographic fieldwork. First we presented the method and explained why this was selected to be the best path to achieve our primary goals: to shed light on how European consumers understand, perceive, value, and trust – or not – EU/national/regional food quality labels and labelled products with a special emphasis on achieving a better understanding of discrepancies between consumers’ stated values and their actual food practices, including planning, purchasing, using/cooking/eating, and disposing of food. Inspired by different studies, both in the field of food and other sustainability and consumption research, we developed a concrete recipe for ethnographic fieldwork in the Strength2Food project.

The second part of this chapter deepened the choice and fine-tuning of our collective recipe. We have given a multifaceted recipe for gaining an extensive taste of everyday food culture based on our experiences in doing ethnographic fieldwork and collecting descriptive information about households’ everyday food consumption in the Strength2Food project. The ethnographic approach combined several interactive methods that included performativity, materiality, and visualisation: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, dialogic conversations, photography, and video recording. Following a first introductory meeting in a public space, each participating household was visited by two researchers three times in different seasons. Researchers participated in and videorecorded planning,

purchasing, cooking, eating, and disposal of food together with the households. Semi-structured interviews about food quality schemes and sustainability were part of the first household visit, and these interviews were also used in the dialogic conversations at the third household visit. The participating households used food biographies (self-documentation and photos) to document their experiences and engagement in food quality schemes.

Recipes are sets of instructions for making or preparing something, and they may be adjusted and revised after they have been used in practice. We also experienced that some instructions in our recipe did not turn out the way we had planned when they were set out and put into practice. As part of the dialogic conversations, the participants were asked to read the transcripts from the semi-structured interviews before the conversation so that we could reflect and discuss quality labels and quality food schemes. However, when we visited the households, most of the participants had not taken the time to read the transcripts or were maybe not accustomed, interested, or comfortable reading interview transcripts, and the discussions turned to other food system-related subjects instead of quality labels. Although we ended up having to change our original recipe, they turned out to be enriching sessions. One of the main learning was how useful it was to have a recipe to follow, but there must be room for constant improvisation and adjustment to the context – which, in turn, turned out to be crucial during the pandemic.

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3 Food for thoughts – a theoretical framework

Jean-Loup Lecœur and Virginie Amilien

Introduction

The chapters in this book, though grounded in the principles of grounded theory – allowing the field to guide the development of theoretical insights – are also underpinned by a theoretical framework conceived and proposed prior to the fieldwork (mostly focusing on quality food including Food Quality Schemes (FQS) local food, organic products and short supply chains – see Chapter 1. Designed during the drafting of the research proposal, this framework was intended to ensure coherence and homogeneity across the research conducted in multiple countries, weaving together diverse contexts into a unified intellectual tapestry. Drawing on our understanding of the subject, prior literature, lived experiences, and contextual framing, we integrated three theoretical models that we found particularly relevant and illuminating for this chapter. Once again, we lean on the strength of a triangle – this time, a theoretical triangle whose foundation is firmly anchored in everyday practices, especially related to quality food products.

A theory can be defined as an organised system of concepts, propositions, and principles designed to explain, interpret, or understand a given reality. Consequently, our three-headed theoretical framework opens doors for both the reader and the researcher,¹ offering guidance, structure, and depth to the research process and its outcomes. It is not merely an intellectual tool for grappling with the complexity of reality but also a framework for organising the findings of our research projects and a means of imbuing the results with meaning. Our theoretical framework aims at being simultaneously rooted in the reality it seeks to explain and shaped by the systems of thought behind the words and gestures of our informants – embedded in narratives and public discourse, in practices, and in representations.

Consider it as a tool that enriches understanding and broadens one's worldview.

Everyday food practices build, as we already noticed, on a combination of routines, values, and contextual factors – facilitated or constrained by access to products, the meanings attributed to food, and the objects used. Buying organic tomatoes (let's retain the example selected in Chapter 1) is not merely a personal choice but part of a compound practice, shaped by dimensions such as seasonality and availability (access to organic tomatoes), knowledge (how to select or prepare them), and meaning (the motivations for eating organic). It is within these everyday food practices that the social is woven, transmitted, and transformed. It is primarily

a matter of describing and understanding the origins of these practices and how they are constructed, a type of research that is not always the most straightforward, as highlighted by these conversations.²

- *Researcher: Why do you go to the market?*- Jeanne: *Uh ... it's a bit cultural, actually. My mom started going because my great-grandmother was living alone, and we decided to take her to the market. It was something she used to do, but as she got very old, she no longer had the strength to do it by herself. So my mom started accompanying her. Then I started going with her because, well, I love cooking, so...* Later we ask the same of Nelly:

- *Researcher: Why do you go to the market?*- Nelly: *Well, because ... (pause) I've always gone to the market. I don't know why, but since ... since I was 23 and moved out of my parents' house, I've always found the market in whatever city I live in. I guess I'm drawn to market goods. I don't know, there's something lively about it. It's ... well, now I have a bit of a deeper reflection on it.* In these two exchanges, it is notable that the researcher frames the question in terms of why – *for what reason is the action performed?* This presumes a rational, conscious actor engaging in an action to achieve a specific goal and elicits a response framed as a justification. However, both answers fail to address the why and instead focus on how the practice came to be established. This distinction is significant: in a sense, Nelly and Jeanne implicitly recognise that they don't ask themselves this question when they go to the market on Friday or Saturday mornings. They just do it, that's all. While there were initial reasons for the practice to emerge, once established, the practice seems to take on a life of its own.

This becomes even clearer with the example from a discussion with Charles and Brigitte:

- *Researcher: Silly question: why do you go to the market?*- Charles: *Well, no, it's not silly, wait... but I don't have the answer (laughs).*- Brigitte: *You like the market.*- Charles: *I like the atmosphere of the market, yes.* Charles, in an effort to politely respond to the sociologist's question (why?), encounters a problem: he realises he doesn't have an answer. His partner steps in to suggest that he 'likes the market.' In other words, she suggests that he appreciates the practice, but this doesn't necessarily mean he engages in the practice because he appreciates it.

Other participants often respond to this question by reflecting on aspects of the market they appreciate, typically after a brief moment of hesitation. They highlight elements such as positive interactions with vendors, the perceived 'quality' of the products, and the overall atmosphere. While these are clearly aspects they value, they do not constitute the underlying reasons for their attendance at the market.

We quickly realise that they go to the market because it has become an ordinary practice. Going to the market is a routine, and no significant disruption has occurred to make them question it; 'Should I continue doing this?' was not a real question before the researcher came and introduced doubt. In this regard, the work of Desjeux and his colleagues on the impact of COVID-19 on consumption practices highlights how a disruption can rapidly alter routines and consumption habits (Moati, 2022). In a sense, the way Julie and Nadine answered the question – by explaining how they started the practice (or how the practice 'recruited' them, to

remain faithful to the SPT approach we are going to deepen below) – is actually more accurate. They are, in fact, answering the question I should have asked: *How did you develop the habit of going to the market?*

This distinction is essential for this volume as it highlights the extent to which food behaviours are not solely rational, conscious decisions – a central assumption in economic approaches – but are predominantly routinised practices. A significant contribution of Social Practice Theory (SPT) lies in its capacity to conceptualise routinised behaviours and to illustrate the viability of alternative theories of action that move beyond both the rational actor model and the bounded rationality model. For analysing everyday, routine behaviours – an objective central to SPT – this perspective proves particularly compelling.

However, SPT offers limited insights into what motivates the consumer. While it provides a better understanding of how practices evolve, it still not addresses the ‘why,’ which remains a central question for socio-ecological transitions. It could be noted – and this will be revisited later – that seeking to understand the ‘why,’ and implicitly the factors driving change, lies at the very heart of the practice approach, as change itself is a practice. However, since routines and habits often act as constraints to effectively stimulating socio-ecological transitions (Wilhite, 2014), it becomes crucial to gain a deeper understanding of what drives the emergence of new ways of doing.

To address this, we will draw on the theory of conventions developed by Loïc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) to better grasp consumers’ justifications. We will particularly explore Thévenot’s concept of engagement regimes (Thévenot, 2006), which does not seek the social origin of actions or tactical exercises but instead focuses on how individuals engage with practices. Engagement in action, he argues, is itself multifaceted. For instance, the same individual might buy organic tomatoes out of habit (within the ‘familiar regime’), because they are following a specific recipe (within the ‘engagement regime’), or for environmental reasons (within the ‘justification regime’) (Thévenot, 2006, pp. 70–72). The same choice may be made mechanically, thoughtfully, or for ethical reasons. Thévenot highlights that practices are not solely shaped by the past, habits, or constraints but also by how individuals become attached to them, what they seek in them, and how they justify them. This theoretical approach, emphasising the diversity of modes of engagement and justification, will serve as the second theoretical pillar of this volume. While Thévenot’s concepts illuminate how actors engage with their environment through everyday practices, they provide limited insight into the influence of policies and public discourses on social engagement. To address this gap, we draw on the concept of Cultural Adaptation Work (CAW) developed by Hegnes (2013, 2024), which focuses on adaptive practices and underscores the interactions between local values and global frameworks. By emphasising adaptation work – encompassing the translation of meanings, the reorganisation of social relations, and the transformation of material environments – CAW offers a valuable perspective for understanding the dynamics of cultural practices.

So this chapter builds on four parts. We begin by introducing Social Practice Theory and its relevance to research on everyday practices, with particular attention to the framework proposed by Shove, Pantzar, and Watson, who identify three core elements that constitute a practice: Material, Competence, and Meaning (2012, pp. 22–26). These elements change in different ways depending on the other elements and other surrounding practices. We will, in a second part, explore a more pragmatic sociological approach through Convention Theory and the three pragmatic regimes to understand better the bricolages and strategies used by our participants to engage in a more sustainable world while focusing on the complex realm of everyday food consumption. In a third part we present Cultural Adaptation Work, underlining the dynamic processes through which people negotiate and reconcile local values with global rules. Eventually we will focus on the ‘in between’ and the bridges to open up to a common reflection on socio-ecological changes. As Boltanski and Thévenot put it, it is not only the model or the principles behind the different worlds of worth that are interesting, but the ‘dialectic in between’ or the bridges as highlighted by Serres (see Chapter 1).

Social Practice Theory

Everyday practices have long captivated researchers and theorists. In the first chapter, dedicated to the conceptual approach, we choose to draw on the foundational contributions of Bourdieu and De Certeau, among other scholars exploring practices, because their perspectives worked particularly relevant to the study of consumption. Bourdieu mostly views practices as socially situated, shaped by one’s position within the social hierarchy, while De Certeau frames them as a way of appropriating and reinterpreting everyday life. For instance, in the example of buying organic tomatoes – discussed in Chapter 1 – Bourdieu might interpret this act as the result of ingrained habits linked to social position rather than a deliberate choice, whereas De Certeau might see it as an improvised adaptation – a way to infuse a simple meal with an exceptional touch, using the organic tomato to ‘colour’ the ordinary.

Since those foundational works of the 1970s and 1980s, the concept of practices in relation to consumption has evolved, often emphasising how practices actively create social and cultural meanings. Early on, several sociologists of consumption sought to move beyond ostentatious consumption and Bourdieu’s focus on social distinction, instead exploring consumption as a practice shaped by the routines and banal gestures of everyday life (Ilmonen, 2001; Kjærnes et al., 2001; Mäkelä et al., 1999; Warde 1997)

Since the early 2000s, Social Practice Theory has steadily gained prominence, emphasising the composite nature of practices and their transformative potential. Foundational scholars such as Alan Warde, Andreas Reckwitz, and Theodor Schatzki drew on a range of theoretical traditions to shape SPT, including Giddens’ structuration theory, Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, and Bourdieu’s work in ‘The Logic of Practice.’ Giddens’ emphasis on the recursive relationship between human actions and social structures remains foundational to SPT, while Latour’s

inclusion of non-human actors expanded its scope. However, Bourdieu's approach has been critiqued within SPT for being overly tied to the concept of habitus.

SPT's foundational works are highly theoretical and interdisciplinary. Schatzki bridges sociology, philosophy, and geography, while Warde's influential 2005 article, 'Consumption and Theories of Practice,' is more pragmatic, shifting the focus from individual, rational consumption to practices composed of interconnected activities. Reckwitz, described as a 'social theorist,' also adopts a conceptual lens, highlighting the centrality of practices in human action. By the mid-2000s, SPT had achieved significant success, particularly in English-language research, with Warde's article cited over 3,400 times.

Despite its widespread adoption, researchers note challenges in SPT's empirical application, inconsistencies in epistemological foundations, and incomplete theoretical engagement in scientific articles while some argue that SPT is sometimes oversimplified, reducing practices to mere labels of meanings, competencies, and materials without deeper theoretical exploration (Dubuisson-Quellier & Plessz, 2013; Halkier & Jensen, 2011). But even if it does not provide a perfect or comprehensive solution, we would like to deepen this approach, which offers a useful lens for this study.

A counter-thought

In the late 1990s, Alan Warde and Elizabeth Shove, while working on consumption, found existing theoretical frameworks inadequate for addressing the emerging issue of sustainable consumption. They observed that much of consumption, such as heating or water use, is 'inconspicuous and invisible,' escaping the focus of theories centred on self-image, communication, and symbolic meaning. Frustrated with these limitations, they turned toward practices, emphasising their unreflective and routine dimensions. Their jointly written article 'Inconspicuous Consumption: The Sociology of Lifestyles, Consumption and the Environment' (Shove & Warde, 1998) already critiqued the inability of consumer culture studies to address environmental dimensions, as utilities like water and energy rarely serve to symbolise identity or social distinction directly.

By 2005, Warde noted that much of the scholarship on consumption was either abstract theorisation or narrowly focused case studies, often based on models of highly autonomous individuals preoccupied with symbolic communication (e.g., Bauman, Giddens). Similarly, Reckwitz, in his 2002 analysis of cultural theories, differentiated practice theory from homo economicus and homo sociologicus models, emphasising that social life is structured more by routines and practices than by rational choices or symbolic communication.

This shift away from individualistic models is central to SPT, which rejects rational-choice frameworks and critiques approaches like Attitude-Behaviour-Choice (ABC) models for oversimplifying social complexity. Shove's 'Beyond ABC' article critiques such models as ineffective for policymaking, advocating instead for an understanding of practices as governed by routines (Shove, 2010). SPT's macro-sociological focus reframes agency and normative dimensions as

embedded within practices themselves, offering a paradigm better suited to understanding sustainable consumption. As for the normative dimension, it is redefined as an integral part of each practice. To quote Welch and his colleagues:

Against the model of the sovereign consumer, practice theory emphasises routine over actions, flow and sequence over discrete acts, dispositions over decisions, and practical consciousness over deliberation. In reaction to the cultural turn, emphasis is placed upon doing over thinking, the material over the symbolic, and embodied practical competence over expressive virtuosity in the fashioned presentation of self.

(Welch et al., 2020)

SPT positions itself as a theory that transcends certain dualisms often framed as aporias (such as the model of the individual guided by norms versus individual rationality, or the dichotomy between the individual and the collective) while integrating diverse contributions from the history of social sciences into its analytical framework, including the material, the symbolic, and the non-reflexive.

The interconnected nature of practices

Social Practice Theory emphasises the interconnected nature of practices, drawing on Reckwitz's canonical definition of practices (cited by Warde in 2005, Shove in 2012, and the majority of empirical studies related to SPT) as routinised behaviours composed of elements such as bodily and mental activities, objects – and their use – knowledge, emotions, motivations, and meanings. Practices form a 'nexus' of interconnected elements, irreducible to any single component. However, Reckwitz's framework is often seen as overly complex for empirical application. Shove, Pantzar, and Watson simplify these elements into three categories: materials, meanings, and competences (Shove et al., 2012).

[we simplify] what Reckwitz describes as mental activities, emotion and motivational knowledge into the one broad element of 'meaning,' a term we use to represent the social and symbolic significance of participation at any one moment.

(Shove et al. 2012 p.24)

'Materials' refer to the objects and infrastructures embedded in practices, such as ovens and supermarkets in food practices. 'Meanings' encompass the symbolic and emotional aspects of practices – such as the health benefits eating organic tomatoes. 'Competences' include practical knowledge and skills, like using a pressure cooker or peeling vegetables. These elements, when dynamically organised, *co-constitute practices*, enabling or constraining specific activities.

Shove and her colleague emphasise the political potential of SPT, particularly in addressing sustainability challenges by reconsidering how materials, meanings, and competences shape everyday life. This pragmatic, accessible framework has become central to understanding the social and material dimensions of practices

(Kropfeld, 2023; Lehtokunnas et al., 2022; Marshall, 2016; Syse & Mueller, 2014), especially in food-related contexts, but little has been written in this perspective on quality food and FQS in everyday food practices, even in an overview on everyday Dutch food practices (Sargant, 2014). In the recent volume in homage to Hal Wilhite (Hansen et al., 2023), stressing the dynamics of social practices and their role in socio-ecological transitions, a few contributions related to food systems exploring how material infrastructures, social norms, and cultural values influence food choices and practices. Although the volume also emphasises the tensions between preserving culinary traditions and fostering sustainable innovation, it offers only limited focus on food quality labels and everyday routines.

Social Practice Theory traditionally shifts its focus away from individuals to examine practices as entities; however, scholars such as Alan Warde suggest that studying individual consumption behaviours remains possible by viewing individuals as intersections of multiple practices. Warde conceptualises consumption as arising from practices rather than being a practice itself and links it to identity through the distribution of practices, which relate us to informant's words and identity narratives.

It is important to note that food practices pose particular challenges for SPT due to their inherent complexity. Warde identifies 'eating' as a compound practice consisting of at least four integrated practices: food supply, cooking, organising meals, and aesthetic judgements of taste (Warde, 2016). These practices exhibit a 'Russian doll' effect, where broader practices (e.g., eating) contain nested sub-practices (e.g., shopping at markets, preparing meals, consuming food). To address this intricacy, Warde proposes breaking down food practices into three core entities: provisioning, meal preparation, and eating. Provisioning involves activities such as shopping, growing food, or fishing, ranging from structured routines to spontaneous improvisations.³ Meal preparation encompasses diverse techniques, from microwaving frozen meals to crafting elaborate dishes with specialised equipment. Finally, eating is a socialised act shaped by cultural norms and often shared in familial or communal settings.

Despite SPT's emphasis on the collective, the theory risks oversimplification by attributing agency solely to practices. This approach can obscure the reflexivity and variability inherent in food practices, as individuals must navigate diverse materials, meanings, and competences. Moreover, food practices are shaped by social positions and hierarchies, as illustrated by Bourdieu's work, yet SPT often neglects this dimension, creating a gap in understanding how practices intersect with class and social reproduction.

To bridge these limitations, we propose here a multi-faceted approach – our triangle – that integrates SPT with individual-focused perspectives, incorporating concepts like lifestyle and narrative identity. Furthermore, drawing on Edgar Morin's theory of complexity, which emphasises feedback loops and emergent properties and challenges the idea that practices alone drive social change. Instead, it highlights the interplay between individuals, practices, and broader social structures, offering a richer understanding of food practices as dynamic, contextually situated, and deeply intertwined with both personal and socio-ecological

transformations. We introduce thus a pragmatic approach to connect the collective and the individual, through the lens of convention theory and CAW.

A pragmatic sociological perspective

‘On justification’

A key dimension of pragmatic sociology we refer to here, is grounded in the model of plural orders of ‘worth,’ which, as Thévenot (2007, p. 413) emphasises, does not entail individuals merely selecting ‘frames’ or other cognitive ‘tools’ to deploy strategically based on the situation. For instance, the use of food quality schemes by consumers can be understood as embedded within conventions shaped by different worlds of worth. Depending on the context, attributes such as local food quality or organic certification represent collective agreements or shared understandings of norms and expectations. These conventions are developed within specific social systems to facilitate and regulate interactions among the actors involved.

This theoretical framework was developed in *On justification* (2006), a foundational book wherein Boltanski and Thévenot move a distance from more rigid sociological frameworks, such as those of Bourdieu or Foucault, where stable roles, positions, and power structures are emphasised. Adopting a pragmatic approach, the authors aim to examine how individuals draw upon various ‘orders of worth’ or ‘cities’ to construct and conduct reality tests, thereby evaluating and legitimising different realities. We therefore introduce this new approach to gain a deeper understanding of the norms, regulations, conventions, and justifications that shape social practices, as well as the cultural context and social changes underlying them. We begin with a straightforward overview provided by Laurent Thévenot, which outlines the conceptualisation of the worlds of worth. This serves as a foundation for the subsequent succinct summary of the core of the framework, with a focus on the six cities while offering only limited discussion of the broader theoretical apparatus:

we analyzed the plurality of ways people submit their action to critical judgments which are legitimate, we moved away not only from the Durkheimian tradition but also the American pragmatism understanding Instead of understanding the collective via membership in a social group (Durkheimism) or the consequences of action (pragmatism), we envisaged it in terms of forms of generalization that are both cognitive and evaluative and that confer legitimacy on persons and things—what we have called their ‘qualification’ in accordance with orders of worth (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). [1991]). These orders are as follows: ‘domestic’ worth, evaluated from the perspective of anchored tradition; the worth of ‘fame,’ understood as visibility in public opinion; ‘market’ worth, determined by competition; ‘industrial’ worth, understood as technical efficiency; ‘civic’ worth, pertaining to the general interest and egalitarian solidarity; the worth of ‘inspiration,’ as figured by the creative break or difference. This model of plural

orders of ‘worth’ does not refer to an individual choosing ‘frames’ or other cognitive ‘tools’ to be used opportunistically given the circumstances.

(Thévenot, 2007, p. 413)

The ‘civic worth,’ rooted in Rousseau’s concept of the social contract, is based on democratic legitimacy. In this worth, an individual is considered ‘great’ when their legitimacy stems from representative democracy, such as in the case of a mayor, whose greatness is derived from the will of the people expressed through voting. The ‘industrial worth,’ inspired by Saint-Simon, operates according to principles of instrumental rationality and productivity, where ‘grandeur’ is conferred by efficiency and functional outcomes. The ‘market worth,’ grounded in Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, attributes greatness to the mercantile order, where competitiveness and the market value of goods or services determine one’s status. The ‘inspired worth,’ drawing on Saint Augustine, emphasises creativity and beauty, with greatness conferred by originality and aesthetic expression, as seen in the work of an artist. The ‘domestic worth’ is based on an order rooted in family structures and traditions, where greatness is tied to heritage and loyalty. Finally, the ‘worth of fame,’ influenced by Hobbes, is centred on reputation, where an individual’s greatness is determined by their public image and the recognition they garner from others.

Following the publication of *De la justification*, additional ‘cities’ have been proposed to expand upon the original framework. The ‘project-based worth’ (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999), emblematic of the ‘new spirit of capitalism,’ prioritises values such as flexibility, autonomy, and the expansion of professional and social networks. The ‘ecological worth’ (Lafaye & Thévenot, 1993) focuses on the inherent worth of non-human existence, independent of its utility to humans. For example, concepts like ‘ecosystem services’ align with the ‘market worth,’ as they emphasise economic utility, whereas valuing a species’ intrinsic right to exist – such as the Great Bustard – clearly corresponds to the ‘ecological worth.’

The authors emphasise that worlds of worth should not be seen as personal traits or characteristics of individuals but rather as sources of legitimacy that people draw upon depending on the situation. Moreover, the nature of a physical space does not necessarily dictate which city will dominate a discussion – debates within a company, for instance, are not automatically governed by the ‘market’ or ‘industrial worth.’ In any given debate, individuals engage in ‘trials’ by presenting arguments rooted in a particular worth. If the trial succeeds, it establishes the relevance of that worth within the context of the discussion, potentially resolving the issue and positioning one worth as more authoritative than the others. For example, in a public debate on urban agriculture, one might appeal to the ‘civic worth’ by saying, ‘I was elected to address this matter; here is our plan for the city.’

Alternatively, the ‘industrial worth’ could be invoked by highlighting the productive benefits of urban farms, while the ‘market worth’ might appear in arguments such as, ‘Subsidising urban agriculture creates unfair competition in the market.’ The use of FQS is here seen as a matter of convention in different worlds of worth. Dependent on the context, FQS represent a kind of agreement or understanding of

shared norms and expectations, developed within a given social system in order to mediate interactions between the actors involved.

The regimes of engagement

Thévenot continued his research on forms of coordination from the late 1990s onward, to encompass all forms of action. Thévenot's theory of 'regimes of engagement' offers a rich framework for analysing how individuals relate to their environment and pursue different 'goods' through action. Developed as an extension of the model proposed in *On Justification*, the theory explores diverse forms of action that actors engage in depending on context and circumstances. Thévenot emphasises the importance of pragmatism, realism, and moral considerations, rejecting static models of action in favour of a dynamic approach. This summary delves into the four primary regimes of engagement – familiarity, planned action, justifiable action, and exploration – and considers their application to food practices, along with the methodological challenges that arise.

'The regime of familiarity'

The 'regime of familiarity' is the most intimate and least public of Thévenot's engagement regimes, rooted in an individual's close, habitual relationship with their environment. This regime is characterised by personalised attachments to objects and spaces that become extensions of the actor's personality. Thévenot contrasts this regime with the agency of the autonomous individual in planned action, noting that familiar objects are not functionally detached but rather maintain and expand the actor's intimate being.

For example, a student using an old armchair to store clothes or a makeshift desk assembled from books and planks illustrates the regime of familiarity. These practices might appear disorganised to an outsider but represent personalised 'bricolage' – creative, embodied ways of interacting with familiarised objects. Such actions are deeply embedded in the actor's daily life and resist easy communication or standardisation. In *L'action au pluriel* (2006), Thévenot describes his own interactions with a broken drawer, a faulty office chair, and a slow computer as examples of this regime. These objects are not merely tools but integral parts of his intimate environment, requiring a narrative or ethnographic approach to fully capture their significance.

In food practices, the regime of familiarity manifests in the use of trusted ingredients, favourite recipes, and habitual kitchen routines. These practices are non-reflective and grounded in a sense of ease and comfort, aligning closely with the concept of routinised behaviour in Social Practice Theory. Familiarity is orientated toward the 'good' of personal convenience, as Thévenot explains: 'Worn and shaped by the use we make of them, tamed things sustain our intimacy by reminding us of the paths we have forged together⁴' (2006, p. 104).

‘The regime of planned action’

The ‘regime of planned action’ introduces a more public and structured form of engagement, emphasising intentional planning and instrumental functionality. Unlike the fluid and intuitive interactions of familiarity, planned action requires actors to adapt their environment to meet standardised expectations. Thévenot highlights both the agency involved in planning and the functional capacity of objects in this regime.

The sociologist illustrates this regime with examples of student apartments. To make such spaces usable by someone else, the occupants would need to clean, organise, and repair them, removing the personalised adjustments that made the space functional for themselves. Similarly, lending an office to a colleague would necessitate fixing broken furniture and replacing outdated equipment to ensure conventional usability. Public spaces like hotel rooms also reflect this regime, as they are designed to meet standardised expectations of cleanliness, functionality, and organisation for a broad audience.

In food practices, the regime of planned action might involve following a step-by-step recipe for an unfamiliar dish, such as veal marengo or falafels. The cook relies on instructions and functional tools to complete the task. Similarly, a shopper navigating an unfamiliar supermarket functions within this regime, relying on signage and standardised layouts to locate items. Planned action is orientated toward the ‘good’ of efficient and conventional utility, ensuring that actions and spaces are accessible to a wider public.

‘The regime of justifiable action’

The ‘regime of justifiable action,’ or the regime of justification, is the most public and communicable of Thévenot’s engagement regimes. Grounded in the framework developed in *On Justification*, this regime involves actors entering debates to resolve disputes by appealing to shared orders of worth. It is orientated toward establishing legitimacy and resolving disagreements through reality tests.

This regime is activated when the other regimes fail to manage a situation. For instance, if a rented apartment develops a significant problem, the tenant and landlord may debate whether the issue stems from misuse or a defect in the space. As Thévenot explains, the debate may escalate, with both parties appealing to broader principles – such as efficiency, safety, market value, or patrimony – to justify their claims. These principles correspond to the ‘cities’ of justification and provide a framework for resolving disputes.

In the context of food practices, the regime of justification is evident in public controversies such as mad cow disease, pesticide use, and food labelling scandals. Media debates often feature experts, policymakers, and consumer advocates arguing from different ‘cities’ to justify their positions. Within households, similar debates might occur over choices

'The regime of exploration'

A last regime – which would make it a fourth one – developed by Nicolas Auray and referenced by Thévenot, is the one 'of exploration,' which focuses on situations of novelty, where individuals actively seek out and test unfamiliar environments or practices. Unlike the 'regime of familiarity,' which relies on a stable and familiar relationship with the world, exploration thrives on the excitement of discovery. It is characterised by an intentional engagement with unfamiliarity, driven by the 'good' of novelty.

For instance, a person trying out a new kitchen appliance, such as a Thermomix, or shopping at an unfamiliar supermarket, engages in exploratory behaviour. In these moments, the individual's interaction with the world is shaped by curiosity and openness, possibly serving as a bridge toward familiarisation over time. While Auray's work emphasises sustained exploration in technical contexts, this regime also highlights the transient nature of exploration, as seen in food practices where novelty coexists with eventual routinisation.

'Extending Thévenot to the everyday food practices'

Thévenot's engagement regimes, which emphasise functional or utilitarian 'goods,' fall short of capturing the complexity of food practices, which encompass a broader spectrum of values such as health, price, taste, sustainability, tradition, and aesthetics. For instance, one informant highlights the interplay of these values through her preference for organic food, driven by health and environmental concerns, but complicated by budget constraints and her artistic focus on meal aesthetics. Similarly, studies on organic consumption in Denmark and animal welfare in Norway demonstrates how values align with a different 'worth' of justification, such as the 'civic worth' (public health) or the 'domestic worth' (family well-being), revealing the tensions and compromises inherent in food-related decision-making (Amilien & Kjærnes, 2017; Andersen, 2011; Andersen et al., 2018).

Eventually applying Thévenot's framework to food practices reveals significant methodological challenges, particularly in distinguishing between and transitioning across different regimes of engagement. First, food practices often involve 'intertwining regimes.' For instance, cooking an unfamiliar dish, such as home-made sushi, may engage the 'regime of planned action' (following a recipe step by step), while the familiar tools and environment of the kitchen remain rooted in the 'regime of familiarity.' This nesting of practices complicates the identification of a single regime, as multiple modes of action are often engaged simultaneously. Second, 'transitions between regimes' add further complexity. Actors frequently move from one regime to another. A newcomer to a supermarket, for example, may initially rely on the 'regime of planned action' by using signage and perceptual clues to navigate, but, as they develop routines and familiarity with the layout, their engagement shifts toward the 'regime of familiarity.' These transitions are gradual and fluid, making it difficult to pinpoint when one regime ends, and another begins. Finally, 'interpretative difficulties' emerge when attempting

to observe and distinguish another person's engagement regime. Differentiating between planned action, familiarity, or exploratory curiosity necessitates interpreting the actor's intentions and perceptions, a task made particularly challenging when the researcher lacks direct access to the individual's internal reasoning. As Thévenot emphasises, a person is also sustained by familiar engagements – silent and embodied attachments that, while contrasting with the explicit articulation of a promise binding the individual to a specific project or contract, often remain invisible to the researcher, except through glimpses offered in some narratives.

These three points underscore the significance of the in-between space, where both bridges and boundaries either converge, or intersect, allowing to better grasp how practices stabilise and evolve, creating opportunities for reimagining everyday life in the context of continual crossings and transitions. This brings to mind the concept of 'thresholds' introduced by Paxson and her colleagues, who, in a recent work (Paxson, 2023), explore eating and feeding as 'thresholding projects' – dynamic processes that mediate, test, and sometimes transform boundaries, whether physical, social, or conceptual. Such projects hold the potential to reinforce existing boundaries or to transgress them, creating openings for new ways of being, relating, and understanding while simultaneously attending to the maintenance of boundaries amidst ongoing crossings and disruptions. Together, these concepts expand the analytical lens, positioning bridges and thresholds as dynamic spaces where change, connection, and renewal are constantly negotiated.

Where bridges and thresholds highlight the transitional and liminal nature of such spaces, CAW delves into the relational mechanisms that enable these transitions to occur. Both approaches underscore adaptation and transformation, but CAW provides a more process-orientated view of how these changes are enacted and sustained.

Cultural adaptation work

Cultural Adaptation Work is a conceptual framework developed to better understand how people continually adapt their understanding, their interaction forms and their material environment relationally, in time and space through *translations of meaning*, *reorganisation of social relations* and the *transformation of things* (Hegnes, 2013, 2024). Understanding the use of FQS as transformative practices permits us to identify, describe, and understand the construction, power relations, adaptations, justifications, consequences, and strategies to cope with risk in an over-civilised risk society. To further strengthen the understanding of our participants' words and expressions, we need to deepen the dialectical dimension of FQS. In this respect, we propose to use the CAW which focuses on actors and their customisation capabilities and opportunities, while practice theory focuses on the practice and the players are subordinate (ideally) to the practice. Based on Convention Theory, Hegnes argues that there is a need to focus on the adaptations that occur between different values, rather than cultivate them as ideal typical forms: 'Dedicated and indiscriminate uses, for example Actor Network Theory and Convention Theory in analysis of PDO/ PGI, enclosed the actants in a static

network of conventions and shadows for exploration of the nuances of the actors' adaptation practices in different contexts' (Hegnes, 2013, pp. 45–46). We would add that neither has SPT been – as far as we know – particularly focusing on the field of FQS and local food consumption.

The conceptualisation of CAW and adaptive practices sheds light on the complex relationship between local practices and global regulations. It specifically emphasises how FQS as PGI or PDO introduces a new vocabulary and food-cultural knowledge in non-South European cultures, fostering connections between food, people, and places, and aligning with the scheme's goal of preserving local food traditions. However, the adaptation process also generates paradoxes: it can alienate producers from their products and lead to standardisation, reducing diversity – contradicting the scheme's aim of fostering innovation and variety. Following Hegnes, it can be observed that, in the Norwegian context, although food specialisation has progressed since the 1980s, the government's 2020 target for increasing local food consumption has not been fully realised. Achieving this goal necessitates long-term adaptation across manufacturing processes, logistical systems, and, crucially, consumer food practices.

Concluding words – the richness of combining

The ways we choose, buy, cook, speak, and feel are embedded in routines shaped by objects, knowledge, and norms and infused with meaning. These practices are sustained by collective routines shared among members of society, who carry them, adapt them, and transform them over time. This is an approach we have already, albeit modestly, attempted in an article (Amilien et al., 2022) – building on the data material used in Part I and highlighting the significance of examining both collective routines and individual engagements to better understand the complexities of food consumption – but in this chapter we aim to provide you with the tools to explore further this approach.

Social Practice Theory invites us to view society not through the lens of isolated individuals or abstract structures, but through the practices themselves. Within this framework, Thévenot offers a profound contribution by focusing on how individuals engage with the world through action. Unlike Bourdieu, who emphasises embodied dispositions, or De Certeau, who highlights the everyday tactics of users, Thévenot introduces regimes of engagement, enriching SPT by highlighting the plurality of ways we act and the diversity of worlds in which we are involved. Importantly, Thévenot does not simply ask why we act but explores how we attach ourselves to what we do, how we seek meaning, coherence, and presence in our actions. Practices, in his view, are not simply habits or strategies but deeply contextual and adaptable modes of engagement with the world. This perspective can be further enriched by integrating the concept of Cultural Adaptation Work, a framework opening to understanding how individuals and groups continually adapt their understanding, interaction forms, and material environments relationally, across time and space, through translations of meaning, reorganisation of social relations, and transformation of objects. It shifts the focus from practices themselves to the

actors engaged in these practices and the public and political environment actors are engaged in. While SPT emphasises practices as entities in which actors are ideally subordinate, CAW brings actors back into the centre of analysis, highlighting their adaptive strategies and the dynamic interplay between local values and global frameworks.

Together, SPT, convention theory, and CAW provide complementary lenses for exploring the complexity of social life. SPT can help analyse how these routinised consumer behaviours are shaped and how they might be reconfigured, Thévenot's regimes provide a structured way to understand how actors move between habitual, practical, and justificatory engagements, while CAW sheds light on the insight into the cultural and institutional dynamic processes of adaptation and negotiation to facilitate such change. By combining SPT and Thévenot's regimes of engagement with CAW, we gain a richer understanding of how food practices are both structured and adaptive, how they negotiate the interplay of local and global dynamics, and how actors balance competing demands of tradition, innovation, regulation, and everyday practice. This integrated approach, which we readily refer to as 'food culture' (Amilien, 2018; Amilien & Krogh, 2007; Amilien & Notaker, 2018), offers a richer understanding of how local practices, global regulations, and socio-material relationships intersect in the evolving landscape of food consumption and production and provides a robust framework for studying the evolving relationship between food, culture, and society.

This chapter concludes with words from the outcome of a round table on Ricœur's spirit, elegantly weaving together the conceptual and theoretical triangles into the brilliance of a diamond.

Our analysis of a plurality of action regimes invites us to conceive of identity not merely as something characterised, but as something composed and continually recomposed through multiple engagements. This layering of engagements lends a dynamic consistency to the person. By deepening the notion of regimes, we aim to account for *action in the plural*, anchoring each regime to a mode of engagement that sustains the individual's capacity as an agent. In hindsight, I observe a kinship between the notion of engagement and Ricœur's concept of promise, though there are notable differences. Extending beyond the individual speech act of making a promise and its moral fulfilment, engagement encompasses broader modalities of connection that sustain the person — both beneath and beyond the explicit act of giving one's word.

(Dosse et al., 2006, p. 48)

Notes

- 1 Reminder: In the present case, the theoretical framework was conceived and proposed prior to the fieldwork, specifically during the drafting of the research proposal. It was then slightly revised and systematically adapted to the findings emerging from the qualitative study on consumption conducted within the Strength2Food project. As such, it

serves as a true working tool, providing the foundation upon which the interview questions and analytical frameworks were built.

- 2 Note on Authorship: This chapter is built upon the theoretical framework developed within the Strength2Food project, later expanded in an article co-authored by the two authors together with Roberta Discetti (author of Chapter 10), and, most notably, Jean-Loup Lecoœur's doctoral research, which offered a rich and in-depth exploration of the topic. Jean-Loup undertook his doctoral work within the framework of the Strength2Food project, under the supervision of Virginie Amilien as one of his advisors. The chapter is strongly grounded in his dissertation (Lecoœur, 2024), with certain quotes or paragraphs directly translated from French – with OpenAI support – as for example the discussions presented here.
- 3 This reminds us of the four typical stages of consumption (planning, purchasing, using and disposing – see Introduction and Chapter 1), further developed by Evans (2019).
- 4 Here, we note the significant epistemological difference between Warde or Schatzki's ambition to establish a comprehensive and coherent theory, and Thévenot's much more interpretive and nuanced approach. The quote (translated by OpenAI) is from Thévenot (2001, p.104): 'Usées, façonnées par l'utilisation que nous en faisons, les choses apprivoisées entretiennent notre intimité en nous rappelant les voies que nous avons frayées de concert.'

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4 Everyday food consumption

Planning, purchasing, using, and discarding

*Virginie Amilien, Gun Roos, and
Vilde Haugrønning*

Introduction

Consumption research is about much more than just studying why or how people purchase a product. Researchers usually focus on four complementary fundamental aspects or stages in consumption behaviour: planning, purchasing, using, and discarding (disposal). Some researchers, such as Desjeux (Desjeux, 2006, pp. 96–110), have expanded the behaviours of consumption into seven stages or more. Researchers in sociology of consumption, such as Warde (2005), emphasise the fact that consumption is not only about economy, personal preferences, or a need to be different, but should be seen in the context of practices, values, and meanings. From this perspective, consumption is linked with cultural values and information diffusion and transmission (Heilbrunn, 2005, p. 19). This is particularly pertinent in food consumption related to Food Quality Schemes (FQS) because consumers tend to use food products that have a cultural value. This chapter on everyday food consumption will shed light on how Food Quality Schemes (FQS), Short Food Supply Chains (SFSC), local, and organic food are embedded in consumption practices. Further, we wish to explore their role in a more sustainable food system, not only because of the way they are produced but also, or mainly, because of the thoughts and self-reflection they might stimulate for consumers and actors in the food system.

The importance of local and quality food must be considered in parallel with a relatively recent democratisation of goods through mass production and distribution. This rapid evolution has happened after centuries of quite traditional agriculture and markets, which have totally changed since the 1950s in Europe. Food products – like other consumable products – have been standardised, decontextualised, or extracted from their original form, and a dissociation from producers and product knowledge required new ways of communicating with consumers, such as logos and labels.

Labels and food quality schemes are examples of means of communication used to reduce the growing distance between producers and consumers. According to Evans and Miele:

Ethical food labels are far from inevitable; indeed, they emerge from and represent a particular set of social and economic circumstances, and they

enshrine a particular set of relations between consumers and producers. Ethical labels are not merely labels; rather, they are icons that encapsulate a particular form of food provisioning.

(Evans & Miele, 2017, p. 191)

Other means of communication are possible, and the authors suspect that labelling may not be the best means of supporting ethical agro-food. The potential efficiency of other systems, such as state regulation, should be considered. Wiskerke (2009) reflects upon quality food schemes and proposes concretising or reconstructing FQS through a territorial agro-food approach. Linking quality or ethical schemes to territory can help consumers to identify them easily, but how do consumers use labels? FQS labels represent immaterial values yet are concretised using material symbols, such as logos. Little is known, however, about the way they are embedded in consumption practices. The aim of this chapter is thus to frame quality food and issues linked to sustainability within, inside, or as back stories of everyday food practices.

One central pillar in this chapter is the investigation of food practices, with a focus on local products, symbols of quality, and short-chain distribution – factors that are linked to potential improvements in food sustainability. As such, the chapter contributes with a deeper insight into everyday consumption practices while specifically focusing on the role quality food products play in consumption practices and whether and how consumers choose and use FQS and local food products. Consumption situations and constraints are hugely significant, as nobody generally behaves like ‘a typical consumer’ but consumers instead behave according to different contexts and roles (as a mother, as a woman, as a researcher, etc.). As argued by Halkier and Jensen, the consumer is ‘seen as a carrier of practices and as a place for intersection of a plurality of practices as... parental practices, work practices and transportation practices’ (Halkier & Jensen, 2011, p. 105). Based on this perspective, the concept of the consumer itself is a social construction. It is the reason this study proposes an approach to understand the so-called consumer through practices, combining agency, communication, thoughts, food products, and infrastructure.

Approaching everyday food consumption through social practices

In this chapter, food provisioning as a mundane everyday activity will be regarded as social and material contexts that are equally important for individuals’ current and future action (Wilhite, 2016, p. 24). When studying consumption within Social Practice Theory (SPT) – see Chapter 2 – it should be noted that consumption is not a practice in itself, but rather a moment in almost every practice. Consumption is thus considered to be generated through everyday activities linked to food, such as planning, shopping, purchasing, cooking, and eating. These activities are also distinct practices in themselves, as actors who recognise them as specific practices (Halkier, 2009, p. 4; Warde, 2005). This helps to transcend the structure–agency or ‘top-down–bottom-up’ dichotomy and provides a more balanced approach where

practices in society determine social activities (Shove, 2004, p. 85). This study gives particular importance to routines, time, material devices, or infrastructure ascertained from informants' statements, images, and fieldwork observations.

In Chapter 3, social practices were roughly defined as everyday behaviours, or routines, common to a particular socio-cultural group of people. The third chapter also argued that social practices build on different dimensions such as time, materiality, or infrastructure, underlining that they are not necessarily linked to individuals or individual choices. In this classical SPT spirit, where social practices are the basic social entities carried out by individuals, the study presented in this chapter highlights the informants' words, gestures, and attitudes during ethnographic fieldwork as 'practitioners' or 'carriers' of practices (Shove & Pantzar, 2005, p. 54). As we mean that food culture offers a perspective of study 'embracing practices, structure, norms, situations, and signs, but also taking into account the environment in which food as a cultural system is established or transformed, at once in its material and its immaterial aspect' (Amilien, 2018, p. 87), we take here inspiration from the work of Shove and Pantzar (2005). The study focuses on complementary types of dimensions of practices, including material, competence, and meanings, with time and infrastructure added. The latter relates to materiality, but, in this study, more specifically in combination with institutions or the organisation of the food cultural system.

Five entries through practices linked to food consumption

This chapter can be seen as a discussion with a group of people who were kind enough to participate and share their daily food habits. We therefore suggest starting by having coffee together, as is common when it comes to meetings and discussions between friends or colleagues. In this situation, with a dialogue between authors and readers, having coffee does not necessarily mean having a *cup of coffee*, but more *taking the path of daily eating practices through a coffee approach*. After the coffee, we explore further how routines, time, material devices, and infrastructure linked to household food procuring, home cooking, storing in fridge and freezer, and leftovers may play a role in sustainability.

A cup of coffee

There are at least three reasons to start this chapter on everyday food consumption with a good cup of coffee. The first is that all the families we visited – around 40 households spread across 7 European countries, as described in Chapter 2 – had coffee. Coffee is therefore a common denominator among all our informants, whether consumed or not (a few of our informants stated that they do not drink coffee). Secondly, through the different machines, vessels, and coffee types used to make coffee at home, coffee offers an entry point to the materiality of food practices. Lastly, coffee is one of the food products whose labels have been around for a very long time, both for fairtrade and organic coffee – and have food quality symbols that are well-known and recognised by consumers.

Inspired by one of the pioneer SPT studies on *showering as a practice* (Hand, Shove et al., 2005), this study focuses on coffee drinking as an everyday food practice. The coffee machine illustrates how eaters/drinkers are carriers of practices by exploring coffee drinking as an everyday routine.

Arne and Anne, parents of a three-year-old girl and a one-year-old boy, are in their thirties. We have just returned from shopping in the supermarket just down the street in a central urban area of Oslo. Once the shopping items are put away, Arne gives us a quick tour of the kitchen, shows us the different machines and utensils they tend to use, and he prepares a coffee (Figure 4.1).

Arne: We have this machine, the coffee machine, which I also use a lot.

Anne: It can run itself... so to speak.

Gun: Yes, so is it used several times a day?

Anne: Yes.

Arne: Yes, it's one of the first things that happens in the morning when it's switched on, and that's also because we use it for hot water for the kids' porridge

Gun: Yes, a bit of a multi-purpose machine?

Arne: But coffee is the main attraction. We wouldn't have used it otherwise. We both start the day with coffee, and I usually have an espresso after dinner.

Arne states later in the interview: *This machine is indispensable.*(Norway H1, 1)

Regardless of the type of coffee machine our informants own, it often takes centre stage in the kitchen, not only visually and physically, but also because making coffee is the first thing they do in the morning when they get up. Thinking about coffee as a social practice rather than an experience of taste, pleasure, or an individual's relationship to coffee, opens new doors when it comes to daily food consumption.



Figure 4.1 Arne and Anne's coffee machine – in the heart of the kitchen

Another couple in their thirties, who also live in the centre of Oslo, recently bought a similar machine. The man is especially proud of it, perhaps because they only had instant coffee during our previous visit. He states:

This is the machine. I think it's very interesting to make coffee myself, and watch the whole process (first grinding the beans, then comes the espresso, and then the milk, etc.) It's also interesting to make filter coffee and watch the coffee flowing down through the filter. It makes you feel cosy. I probably drink most coffee at home now that I've got a proper machine. Before that, I mostly drank coffee when I was out. At home, I make espresso with milk and black coffee using a filter. But I only started drinking coffee when I started working. Before that I didn't like coffee! I started with latte, and eventually I got used to black coffee. I've never felt that black coffee is delicious; it's more about the smell and having something warm to hold. It tastes just fine, but I think latte or mocha is good. Now I drink coffee every day, both at work and at home. If I start work early, I like to drink coffee when I get to work, and if I start work late, I make coffee for myself in the morning. It's partly about the smell of the coffee, and partly about waking up. If I drink a latte or a mocha, it's more about enjoying myself. What I perhaps like most is the aroma, that it is warm, and that it tastes delicious. I also like the process of making it with the machine.

(Norway, H8-23)

The drink – its taste and smell – the socially acquired habits, and the machine, which (or whose, as it almost has an agency) process also build on pleasure and joy, emphasise the complexity of the relationship to a food product. All the coffee-related quotes are images from everyday food consumption that underline at least three interconnected dimensions related to practice itself (materiality, conventionality, and temporality) emphasised in Hand et al. (2005). Shove and her colleagues later featured materiality, competence, and meanings as pillars of the dynamic of social practices (Shove et al., 2012), while Paddock showed the interconnection between food practices 'that are embedded in materiality (housing, technology), infrastructure (transport, amenities) and cultural notions of appropriateness (ideas about proper eating, care and convenience)' (Paddock, 2017, p. 135). Exploring food consumption practices through a coffee machine combines all these dimensions. The materiality of a coffee machine carries the weight of technology, social order and norms, the contrast between work and leisure, conventions at work and in society, cultural history, genres, and socio-economic perspectives (Plessz & Guéguen, 2017), the meaning of objects (Baudrillard, 1996) as well as taste, pleasure, convenience, and care.

Sometimes a coffee machine is conspicuous by its absence. In the home of another Norwegian family (H5V1) there is no visible coffee machine in the kitchen, yet the type of coffee the couple chooses to buy is important:

Sofie: So, we really like Änglamark.¹ We started buying that coffee in Denmark. Sander: We still have the spoon from there. Sofie: Yes, hehe. And so... you can make coffee in many ways. Sven: Oh, you can (laughter). Sofie: No, but we like it it's better than many other types of coffee. Sven: That kind of instant

coffee.Sofie: Yes, that instant coffee. I was about to say that. So, it's just as well to make it, with smaller flasks for grinding beans and such, then it's perfectly fine.Sven: Everyday coffee.Sofie: Everyday coffee, yes.VA: And now you can buy it in... NorwaySofie: Now it's coming out in Norway, yes.Hjalmar: At Coop.Sofie: Because in Denmark, they have a much wider selection in the Ånglamark range. So, we also bought that with our various things there, organic sugar, among other things, but the fact is that when the selection there is so much bigger, more and more will come here over time. Through further discussion, it transpired that Sven and Sofie had influenced the product range at their local shop by requesting their favourite coffee, which is now available. Their actions could impact the distribution system and encourage the purchase of more sustainable products.

The coffee approach shows us the materiality of food practices and the role of infrastructure and culture. Drinking coffee is part of everyday routines, especially in the morning and at work, and the coffee machine plays an integral role in many households. The selection of coffee in the supermarket influences what type of coffee is prepared. When it comes to why and where people buy food, we suggest having a closer look at 'Procuring food.'

Procuring food

The previous entry emphasised that, before making or enjoying a cup of coffee, the eater must purchase coffee or beans. This is the reason why 'procuring' has been chosen as the second entry: procuring food affects sustainable consumption and is thus a practice that is relevant to explore. In European countries, how people obtain the food they consume at home is not remarkably varied. Here again, market infrastructure and foodscapes are central. It is primarily a matter of shopping in a supermarket, although some also visit farmers' markets, buy directly from farmers, have a garden, and order from online stores. Nevertheless, using a qualitative approach enabled the identification of different types of supply, as well as distinct dimensions within each type of supply. Whether it's home-grown fruit and vegetables, people catching their own fish and picking berries in the woods, or homemade jam or jars of pickles being exchanged for fruit or homemade cookies, self-production and exchange play an important role in every country, if not by quantity, then by quality. Quality proves to be important, particularly the emotional characteristics associated with the types of relationships that self-production or exchange generates – personal relationships and a closeness to nature, people, objects, and especially food products (Pétursson, 2018).

Somewhere between self-production and supermarkets are visits to farms or markets, which in some countries studied are known as farmers' markets and differ slightly from open farms, where consumers can have a direct relationship with the producer. As in most short supply chains, characterised by the presence of no or few intermediaries between producers and consumers, it is often a question of re-establishing a connection with the basic produce and the way it is produced. This connection, which was erased over time through the advent of large-scale distribution, is framed by agricultural policymakers as central to the main reason

that quality labels were established. They are supposed to *speak* to consumers by informing them of the origin and quality of the product. Sometimes they work, sometimes they do not, as we observed during fieldwork.

I don't often buy ham, but when I do, I buy it in a local shop, as I have more trust in the shopkeeper who chooses the ham himself. I don't know what brand it is The problem with Gragnano pasta PGI is its origin: Campania. I would need a further guarantee to buy it, as I don't know the producers and I don't trust them. I'm sorry, but I can't buy it. The fact I know a producer gives me more trust, because it's all based on a relationship of trust.

(Italy, H3)

The place of purchase has an influence on whether an FQS product is bought. The label may be important in a supermarket setting, but is not as relevant at farm shops or when foraging. While the label is a sign, more material things, such as the shopping cart, also deeply influence purchasing practices (Cochoy, 2008). However, we will focus here on the architectural dimension of the shopping place and its impact on sustainability. We followed the 'usual' path informants take in the supermarket, including their knowledge of the aisles and products, shelves, presentation (low, middle, high shelf), and whether they choose FQS products. When it comes to navigating supermarket aisles, we went shopping with Arne (with the nice coffee machine) during our first visit. Arne had decided to buy winter cod and knew precisely where it was in the shop. We accompanied him directly to the fish section, but when we arrived, there was unfortunately no more winter cod in stock. He was not pleased and initially considered substituting the winter cod with another type of fish. However, his recipe explicitly stated winter cod. It wasn't very pleasant, but he eventually found some regular cod that looked nice. He bought that and said that:

In practice, my choice is more based on what we want, or think is good than where it comes from, but there is a dual food-shopping philosophy. For one, we want everything to be inexpensive and good quality, and secondly, we like enjoying food – so it's *a bit of a mixed bag*.

On this occasion, fish was purchased that was not in the recipe, but that looked good.

Several informants emphasised the importance of a visual connection to food. The appearance of the product is more important than the written information attached:

I look at the colour and the product itself. Now these pastry leaves are fresh. The ones that have aged several days start to get blue stains; the mould starts to kick in. So, I look at the product. I usually don't pay any attention to what it says on the label.

(Serbia, H5)

Mikael, an African-Norwegian from Oslo (H2), tapped all the foods he bought during our first visit. He assessed the vegetables by eye, touched them, smelled them, and then decided to buy one or the other. In a way, he was a very different customer from the other people in this supermarket in a local shopping centre in Oslo, and he was conscious of that fact. He explained that it was a habit, a routine he had learned in his country of origin, where choosing food required all the senses but not any label.

Suzan, an elderly Norwegian informant, would systematically inspect products to determine their origin. If she felt it was necessary, she also read the information on the package and stated, 'I must confess that I always read the label on the back to know whether or not there are chemicals' (Norway, H6).

Where do our informants usually buy food, and why? Our Serbian informant was quite clear about this:

For me, the decisive factor when shopping is proximity. Going to the farmers' market is an exotic event, and I enjoy it as a sort of special occasion. Even though the Đeram farmers' market is close to my home, Maxi [supermarket] is even closer.

(Serbia, H4)

However, this view was nuanced by a British informant:

I would prefer to buy our fruit and veg from a fruit and veg shop and our meat from a butcher, but it's just so hard. I mean, they're only open from nine to five thirty, and most of the time you're at work nine to five thirty. So, you have to rely on supermarkets. They've got you in that way, where you're just doing shopping when it's convenient for you, and all the smaller, independent type shops are usually closed.

(UK, H6)

Several informants spoke in more depth about how convenience, proximity, and availability influence where they buy food. We wish to give as much voice as possible to the informants and have thus organised the text so that we have several direct quotes, interspersed with some analysis and explanatory sections.

Next to [name of a church] is a farmers' market, but that's too far away.... Of course, I do dream about strolling around a market and buying nice things, but the markets I dream of don't exist here.

(Germany, HX)

If I can, I buy everything directly from the producer As a second choice, there is the small local shop, then the supermarket in my area... And then, as a last resort, there's the GDO, the discount shop, where I go only if I'm forced to.

(Italy, H3).

The opening hours of that fishmonger; they're really limited. I think they're only open in the morning.

(UK, H6)

Then you've got a supermarket that's open 24-hour. So, you do end up doing what's convenient instead of doing what you would rather do.

(UK, H6)

When coming home from work, I normally stop at the shop and do the shopping.

(Serbia, H1)

However, it also depends on the situation:

It depends on what kind of shopping you want to do, doesn't it? If you were doing a food shop, I'd probably just walk past this, even if it was cheap, but if I was in a different environment, I would probably choose to... if I was in a little farm shop and I saw some stuff like this, I'd be more tempted.

(UK, H4 – Martin)

Or, if we were having friends around or doing something nice, then I'd... it's like, this is all special stuff that wouldn't go in our normal basic weekly shop, which unfortunately is a bit ruled by money and kids, I don't know.

(UK, H4)

There is a certain amount of interest in local products, particularly those from local farms or those produced organically. However, this study highlights that interest differs widely from one product to another, from place to place, from country to country, from locality to locality, and even from one family to another. Food culture plays a significant role. The issue of sustainability is rarely directly mentioned by our informants, although it is implicitly present in several dimensions, such as the importance of seasonality, the desire to have one's own garden, foraging, and concerns about chemicals in food and confidence in local producers. Informants voiced how they take into consideration both the impact of transportation and whether the food is organic, in addition to the price.

Buying zero-kilometre Italian products is a way to enhance the local economy, improve sustainability and lower the environmental impact of production.

(Italy, H4)

I understand getting pineapples from Costa Rica, but you can't get pears from Argentina. It's not about protectionism, it's about ecology. These pears have supposedly travelled by plane, a huge carbon footprint.

(Italy, H3)

One of the German informants states that, 'The closer, the better It depends. If there are German and French apples, I would buy the German ones.' Another stated:

On some things [foods] it says 'organic' but then it's from Chile. Then I think, that's not for me. This is local, I know it's not organic, but then I think I prefer local [because of] transport distances and so on.

(H4 Germany)

However, although Germany is local for some informants, it is not local for other informants in Europe. Linda, a Norwegian informant, was asked if there were any particular products that she bought organic, or whether it varied.

Linda: It varies. If the prices are twice as much, I don't buy them. Researcher: No, so price comes into play... Linda: Yes, and when it comes to that, I notice it a lot when I travel abroad. People buy a lot of organic products in England and in Germany – it's quite common to buy organic. Here, there is more of that type of product that is organic. I read somewhere that Norway was lagging furthest behind in Scandinavia when it comes to the production of organic products, so I have such mixed feelings about it. (Norway, H4)

For Dagny, there is no other choice and no ambivalence:

To me, the most important thing is that the food is not sprayed [with pesticides (?)], but I would buy Norwegian cucumbers because I know that, in Norway, we do not spray cucumbers. Then I can choose non-organic cucumbers because I know they are not sprayed I think about the poison. I do not want that, and I do not want to expose my children to chemicals.

(Norway, H3).

Among the Italian, French, and German informants, trust in local food, in contrast to quality labels, is discussed. Procuring local food was linked to sustainability.

I trust local products more. If I have to go and buy ham or salami, I go to whom I know nearby. I would rather do that than go to the supermarket and buy PDO products. [...] I trust local products without a known label, but from a producer I know. For example, I buy honey because I know the producer. I buy it even if it doesn't have any label. (Italy, H1)

A local brand gives me more confidence because we need less information compared to a product that comes from elsewhere. You can trust something more when you know where it comes from.

(Italy, H2)

I think if I were a big fan of Italy and if I knew the [label] or the region, then I would be more likely to pay attention to it. But normally I just think 'I need Parmesan Cheese.'

(Germany)

Well, it's precisely the protection of the environment, because transportation is shorter, because we also support local production.... The farmers in [small towns] or in rural areas... In fact, what appeals to me is, like you say, short supply chains, or whether it's really organic production, but I don't

care much for the protected denomination of origin or AOC, it doesn't matter to me.

(France, Tiphaine)

However, we sometimes go to a producers' cooperative nearby, where we buy local cheese and local and fresh fruit; we like it because of the quality and the freshness of the products they have. We trust the producers who supply their food there. Buying zero-kilometre Italian products is a way to enhance the local economy, to improve sustainability and to lower the environmental impact of production.

(Italy, H4)

Procuring food from family, neighbours or one's garden emphasises both the importance of seasonality and the need to think about food preservation in a slightly different way than when fresh food is bought at the supermarket. Lea states: 'I never buy vegetables... for instance, tomatoes in winter have no taste. I only buy seasonal vegetables, when I do buy them, because in the summer, I have my garden' (France, HX).

I rarely buy fruits and vegetables because my parents have a vegetable garden, and I get them from them. I get them fresh or frozen from them, so I have them for the whole year.

(Italy, H1)

The way people procure food may have both intended and unintended consequences for sustainability. Purchasing practices appear like clear routines, which on the one hand are individual and depend on the food cultural frame. On the other hand, beyond frontiers and national local traditions, the households generally express how time (season as well as time constraints), materiality (garden or a shop) and infrastructure (from the local road to the way the shelves are arranged in the supermarket), are woven in – more or less – sustainable practices. Other consumption practices, like cooking, which is the focus of the next section, are also underlining a visible link to sustainability.

Home cooking

Arne says:

I think it's more important that the children can enjoy nice food 'adventures' together, that they can participate in cooking, rather than focussing on sustainable food, although I also see that as positive. Especially if they were to use food from their school garden and cook something using that, I would have been very positive.

(Norway, H1)

Cooking is one of the most central phases of food consumption. This is naturally our third entry to the realm of everyday food practices to investigate where and

how the food is cooked, which may affect sustainability. Home cooking includes an infinite variety of possibilities, ranging from ready-to-eat to homemade meals. As one of our French informants points out, it affects not only the quality of the food but also the cost, because ready-made meals are often more expensive and less nutritious.

Either you can cook, or you can't. If you can't cook... I see people who have very little money and yet buy ready-to-eat stuff, that are not very good and that blows their food budget.

(France, H1)

In the families we spoke to, home cooking was not a black or white issue, but instead shades of grey or varied colours, depending on their proficiency, the time available, the disposable budget, age, and the situation – whether a holiday or a school day, for example. Time constraints go hand in hand with the way people cook at home, which could directly impact the sustainability of both purchasing and cooking when households have to buy ready-to-eat or ultra-processed food products. In most families, homemade cuisine was often associated with food quality, as well as with emotions and nostalgia, and cooking skills are transferred from generation to generation. Let's hear from our informants:

I don't have time to cook every workday. Twice a week on average.

(Serbia, H1)

Quality means fresh, healthy food cooked from scratch. We actually do a lot of that now We say to the children, 'If you make your own stuff, you know what goes in it and that's what's really good.'

(UK, H4)

I would rather rely on my own homemade food. Who knows what they put in there!

(Serbia, H2)

I used to spend all my time with my father, and my father was cooking all the time. So of course, it is my father who passed everything I know onto me ... and my father was really ... when it came to transferring skills, he really had the urge to pass on So, it is true that, you are right, in every recipe I make, there is always a bit of my father in it.

(France, HX)

And my grandmother lived with us and she often cooked at home But we really ate just about everything: offal She would make eggs meurette with white wine.... She cooked a lot of things like that, and I used to love it all.

(France, HX).

Although not a necessary part of everyday food practices, home-cooked meals are rather popular in the studied households. Those who did not learn how to cook from family or at school still have many alternatives. Arne is doing food courses.

He also uses cookbooks, as on the day we visited him for the first time. He was reading the recipe quite carefully (and asking the researcher to crush pepper with a mortar, but only one spoonful of pepper). He told us that he often uses recipes and not only from recipe books, but would more often find them on the internet. For instance, he googles a product (for example, cod) and looks for a recipe he likes. 'We would like to use cookbooks more, but they're not so accessible and it takes time... so it's often the internet.'

Cookbooks are often used more as decoration than for regular use. We asked Linda, who previously said that she looked at cookbooks but did not always follow the recipes. She answered:

yes, it's more for getting inspiration and such. And you could say... someone like Jamie Oliver, I read him because he has a way of working where not everything is measured, because I simply can't be bothered. Sometimes I follow recipes to the letter and the food doesn't turn out any better. But he has a way I remember we made pasta dough, and it got difficult and sticky, and he just said, 'just add a dash of that,' cornmeal or whatever, and we added just a dash, and then it worked, so the way he explains things makes you understand. It was really good, but it took a long time.

(Norway, H4)

Home cooking is an approach to everyday food consumption which highlights the tension between environmental and economic sustainability in households. Our informants rarely mention the issue of sustainability, although they do bring up seasonality, the desire to have one's own garden, foraging, and concerns about chemicals in food, as well as confidence in local producers. Environmental sustainability is demonstrated when using local products from the garden or high-quality food sourced for a special purpose. But when quality food, as labelled with FQS, is often more expensive, economic issues emerge. Reading a cookbook and being used to 'a dash of this or that' or asking grandma for a recipe enhances socio-cultural sustainability by strengthening knowledge. Another fundamental instance of know-how, in terms of sustainability, is the preservation of food.

Preservation – storage in fridge-freezer

The fourth entry emphasises, therefore, an exciting and fundamental aspect of sustainable food practices, based on care; it is about preservation and conservation of the environment, people, economy, and food. Systems to ensure that food is available when needed are at the core here. Perishable foods must be preserved; they are stored at home in refrigerators and freezers to prevent food waste and thus support sustainability.

We have a box in the fridge with staple toppings (pålegg), with all the food that's been opened, and we have another storage box with packets of ham and the like, and when that box has no ham in it, I put ham on the shopping list.

(Norway, H5)

Since we don't have a larder and don't buy much, we keep it in the fridge and freezer, or in the kitchen. We do the shopping several times a week. We keep some food in the cold storage, some in the dry storage, all inside the kitchen you see here.

(Serbia, H1)

In one of the Norwegian households, Mona and Mikael had different parallel diets. They had two fridges: one for the Norwegian food (including milk, yoghurt, margarine, jam, cheese, vegetables, fruit, eggs, and ready-made meatballs) and one for storing the African food (for example, dried meat and shrimps, dried leaves, melon seeds, and palm oil). The two fridges were a usual part of their food practices and were dedicated to different uses. Mona and the children ate Norwegian food, and Mikael prepared and ate African dishes. In another Norwegian household, Dagny and David (H4), who mainly ate organic or home-produced food, needed several fridges and freezers in their basement. They used to buy meat directly from a local farmer, then cut and freeze it in small portions, a practice that would not have been possible without a network of other 'sustainable' consumers, and other, more or less sustainable, non-human actors such as the internet (to order and to find out where to order food), the freezers, and also new technologies such as the 'sous vide machine.'

This is reminiscent of the system used by Lea and Tiphaine, and Bernard and Barbara in France, who deep freeze the 'high-quality' bread they buy. They did this for different reasons: Lea buys groceries at the supermarket, including bread, and she doesn't shop very often. Tiphaine can only buy organic bread on Saturdays at the weekly open-air market. Bernard and Barbara have their bread delivered at home (2kg per week) (France, HX).

In the Serbian households, the freezers were typically filled with deep-frozen meat products, fruits, and vegetables. In Germany, most informants live in rented flats and so do not have much space to store food. However, most of them had a freezer and some storage space in cupboards.

The fridge and freezer are magnificent examples of material devices allowing households to preserve food, to store food for everyday use at home, avoid time constraints, give a secure relationship with food, and provide both food safety and food security. Although other means of preservation can easily be considered as more sustainable, because of electricity use and expenditure, fridges and freezers in this study from the 21st century are linked to practices saving time and money. Several households also currently use the fridge and freezer to store leftovers and prevent food waste.

Leftovers and food waste

Thinking that food waste was common among the households in Europe, the freezer turned out to be the usual way to keep leftovers longer. This leads us directly to the last entrance about leftovers, as a path that will guide us to food waste, one of the lungs of sustainability. Informants agree about the fundamental aspect of this issue:

You could say that I tend not to waste anything: we eat the whole fruit, including the skin, we eat fava beans with the skin, and we also eat the radish leaves. We have, as far as possible, a low level of waste. That's because the food we buy is never cheap.

(Italy, H3).

If there are any leftovers, they are never thrown in the bin, it doesn't happen.

(Italy, H4)

[Food waste] is an important issue. I like to use leftovers whenever possible, but I do end up throwing stuff out.

(UK, H5)

I'm quite conscious of it. I hate to throw things out. So, I try to buy only what we need.

(UK, H6 – Ruth).

I am very practical when it comes to food. We buy as much as we can eat. We don't stockpile supplies.

(Serbia, H4)

We reuse leftovers; we don't throw them away. We keep them in the fridge, and if after one week they are still good, so we can eat them We freeze.

(Italy, H5)

Sometimes we buy a big piece of meat because it feels more convenient or it's on special offer. However, in reality, there is no convenience at all because, after we eat part of it, I should freeze the leftovers, but if I don't remember to do it immediately, I throw it away.

(Italy, H4)

We only freeze some types of food: the roast, breaded cutlet for example, and not the bread

(Italy, H2)

There sometimes happens to be food is left over, but we usually eat it for dinner later. On occasion, I cook lunch for two days that can be kept in the refrigerator, and that also makes things easier for me.

(Serbia, BG1)

I reuse leftovers to make something else. For example, if Carlo doesn't eat the whole steak, I can make breaded cutlets or meatballs out of it. If we have some leftover pasta, we have it again for dinner, and I certainly don't throw it away because we can give it to the dog.

(Italy, H1)

Leftovers can simply be reheated, recomposed into a new dish or reused in new recipes. They can also be put aside, for example by freezing, or be given to pets or sometimes thrown away.

We breed animals. Mother has an entire range of animals, so nothing is thrown in the bin.

(Serbia, H5)

We have leftovers, but there isn't anyone to give them to – no dog or cat. We sometimes hang them by the dumpster.

(Serbia, H1)

First of all, I open the package. Then, if it expired the day before, it's fine. Otherwise, I throw everything away because I can't trust it With flour, I first check whether or not there are flies in it, and then maybe I reuse it, but with dairy products – yogurt and so on – I absolutely throw it all away.

(Italy, H1)

Whether it is recomposing leftovers into a new dish or recognising whether a product is still edible, food waste is, once again, a question of knowledge and proficiency. Socio-cultural aspects of sustainability, where knowledge and know-how are at the core, play a major role.

Economic sustainability can nicely complement creativity. Reducing food waste was a specific part of the observations in a Norwegian household, where Mona, the mother of three small children, described several reflexive strategies for keeping food waste in her household to a minimum.

Mona: When the kids are having cereal or oats with milk and do not finish their food, I put it in a waffle mix and make waffles... So, there have been many waffles made.

R: Besides making waffles, is there anything else you do to prevent food waste?

Mona: I only give them [the children] bread with butter in their lunchboxes each day, because it usually comes back untouched... and I don't like bread with old toppings on, but if it is old bread with butter, I can put it in the toaster and eat it.

(Norway, H2)

In addition to these strategies (making waffles and reusing the bread from her children's lunchboxes), Mona would sometimes let her children eat dinner first, and then she would eat their leftovers, thus saving more food for the following day. These strategies were unique to this household and were not common in the other Norwegian households. Mona was quite preoccupied with reducing food waste and being frugal and price-conscious, an attitude often found in families where the food budget was an issue.

We almost never throw anything away Leftovers bother me. When food has gone past its expiration date, then it depends: When it comes to dry cereals or dry legumes, we might say that they have expired, but it just means that they will need more time to rehydrate. However, if vermin have contaminated the food, the response varies from person to person: there are people who put everything in the oven, sterilise it, and use it just the same If it tastes bad, then we throw it away,

(Italy, H3)

The relationship between price and value can be readily stressed while eating food quality products. The respondents sometimes specifically addressed the topics of waste and FQS, emphasising that the quality and price of products directly impacted how readily they discarded leftovers or how careful they were not to leave any waste.

It is more expensive to buy fruits from the farmers' market, so I buy only as much as we are certain we will eat.

(Hungary, HX)

If I get a labelled product, which therefore costs more than the others, I'm more careful when I use it. For example, when I buy Grana Padano, I make sure it doesn't go mouldy.

(Italy, H1)

The labelled cheese Grana Padano or the more expensive fruits from the farmer's market have a specific value that attracts the consumer, the latter being the carrier of practices. Approaching everyday food consumption through waste and leftovers highlights how individuals are bearers of sustainable practices. We are nevertheless left with a taste of ambivalence since the reason why sustainability is put forward might be one or several of the three sustainability pillars.

Some conclusions towards FQS and sustainable everyday food consumption

Presenting five images of everyday food consumption through chosen perspectives, this chapter proposes discussions with households across Europe about how quality food (including Food Quality Schemes, Short Food Supply Chains, local, and organic food) is embedded in consumption practices and is potentially linked to improvements in food sustainability. We have attached particular importance to routines, time, material devices, and infrastructure ascertained from informants' own statements, images, and fieldwork observations related to food consumption – that is to say, planning, purchasing, using, and discarding.

We began by exploring everyday food through the act of drinking a cup of coffee, arguing that this combines material dimensions with competence and meaning.

The materiality of a coffee machine carries the weight of technology, social order and norms, the contrast between work and leisure, conventions at work and in society, cultural history, and the meaning of objects as well as taste, pleasure, convenience, and care. A focus on procuring food reveals that the food households obtain from supermarkets differs in quality from self-produced food or food exchanged through relationships and closeness to nature, people, and objects. Sustainability was rarely mentioned but present through the wish to have a garden, forage, and to buy local and organic products. Acts and processes linked to food procurement also highlighted the weight of infrastructure, which could be the market, the architecture of the shop, or the seasonal harvest from the garden.

The third entry focused on home cooking, which necessitates both time and knowledge. Cooking at home depended on proficiency, the time available, the disposable budget, age, and the situation – whether it's a holiday or a school day, for example. Especially, time constraints go hand in hand with the way people cook at home. Homemade cuisine is often associated with food quality, as well as with emotions and nostalgia, deeply rooted in know-how and skill; home cooking of high-quality food is a testament to strong socio-cultural sustainability. The lack of competence makes it impossible, but cookbooks or internet-based support can shape a bearer of practice. The discussions with households further indicate that there is some interest in purchasing local products, specifically from local farms or those with organic production methods. However, the interest differs widely from one product to another, from place to place, from country to country, from locality to locality, and even from one family to another.

Examining everyday food consumption through the lens of preservation, with a particular focus on modern material devices such as fridges and freezers, we observed how they enable households to care for the food they procure, grow, or forage. In addition to staple foods from the supermarket, they can also store special foods. This approach also opened up an interesting combination and contradiction between economic, environmental, and socio-cultural sustainable features, as freezing leftovers uses electricity but avoids waste.

The discussions on leftovers show that food waste is a question of knowledge and proficiency whether it is recomposing leftovers into a new dish or recognising whether a product is still edible. Sometimes the topics of waste and FQS were discussed, emphasising that the quality and price of products directly impacted how readily they discarded leftovers or how carefully they avoided leaving any waste.

Although the original focus of our project and discussions with the households was on everyday food practices and the use or non-use of Food Quality Scheme food products, we find several links to food sustainability, either environmental, economic, or sociocultural. By looking at everyday household practices through different daily stories or family images, related to material or immaterial aspects of food, we aimed at highlighting the relationship between food culture and consumption, values and care, knowledge and competence, economy and infrastructure, and sustainability.

Note

- 1 Änglamark is an organic brand that they trust for many products, and which is now available in their closest Coop supermarket.

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5 ‘I never focus on the price’

Thinking about quality food through price sensitivity

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Introduction

The price of food products emerges as one of the foremost factors shaping the choices of Strength2Food’s informants; however, this observation is far from being unique to our qualitative approach. Price is an important factor affecting consumers’ food behaviour and an important determinant of consumer choice (Wang & Van Der Lans, 2018). Moreover, food consumers are found to be particularly responsive to prices (Chidmi & Lopez, 2007). Various studies have pointed to the existence of consumer segments that are particularly price sensitive when buying food. Thus, in research conducted in Hungary, the focus of which was the examination of consumer preferences when buying food, it was determined that a significant number of respondents in the sample (392 out of 1447) belonged to the price-sensitive segment. For these consumers, the range of price-related elements, sales, and discounts were the most relevant criteria when selecting food (Garai-Fodor et al., 2022). Consumers with lower socioeconomic status tend to be more price sensitive. Still, various economic-related burdens, such as mobility costs and lack of information, often hinder their ability to make rational decisions (Jacob et al., 2022).

The chapter brings to light the consumers’ words, thoughts, and behaviours recorded through ethnographic data collection, which included field visits to selected households. The researchers actively participated in food purchasing, preparation, and consumption together with participating families. Materials were collected by observation, personal interviews, diaries, photos, and video materials in real-life settings (see Chapter 2). Consumers’ quotes and photos included in this chapter have been selected to advise the readers on the perception, attitudes, and intent regarding price as a determinant of food choice. In part, the chapter bears out the readiness of participating consumers to pay more for Food Quality Schemes (FQS), thus contributing to more sustainable food consumption. Yet, it also brings to light an alternative view on the price sensitivity of consumers regarding FQS, challenging previous studies that have indicated that consumers are ready to pay more for better food quality (Chu et al., 2008). The material collected in our ethnographic study indicates that price-related food choice is a multifaceted phenomenon well rooted in established theoretical knowledge in social sciences yet sometimes confronting commonly accepted economic logic in explaining food consumer behaviour.

Relevance of the price of quality food products in everyday life from the economic theory perspective

A reminder about consumer rationality and price

Rationality in consumer decision making is often related to their tendency to achieve the most satisfactory balance between the perceived value of the product purchased and the price they have to pay for it (i.e., value for money). In purchase situations when information about the product is scarce, thus limiting potential for rational decision making, consumers show the tendency to judge the product quality based on available signals, one of which is the product price. In line with that, a study by Mastrobuoni, Peracchi, and Tetenov (2014) paid special attention to the signaling effect of wine prices on perceived wine quality and consumer demand. The study found a price-quality relationship present yet non-linear, i.e., dependent on the specific price range of wine (a positive price-quality relationship was found only at a lower price range) and consumers' age (price-quality relationship was found stronger among younger consumers).

On the other hand, consumer decision making is not always rational but rather induced by consumers' personal values, emotions, lifestyles, purchase motives, as well as various situational factors, and this is particularly important for understanding price sensitivity. For example, Grunet (2006) uses the food-related lifestyle model to discuss meat consumption and the use of extrinsic cues in quality perception, shopping for meat, food preparation, and consumers' attitudes toward the meat production process and its relevance for meat purchasing. As the author argues, consumers may or may not be price conscious, yet the price itself represents an important traditional extrinsic cue influencing their choice either as the cost cue or a relevant signal of the product quality. Wang and Van Der Lans (2018) have discussed the signaling value of price specifically related with consumers' uncertainty in gift-giving situations and the tendency of a gift-giver to use gift prices as a signal of the importance of their relationship with the receiver. Thus, the authors conclude that people may be less price sensitive when buying for others (gift-giving) than for themselves (personal consumption). Such a conclusion may particularly be relevant for food products, including wine regarded as an experience good (Ashton, 2014), but also chocolates, sweets, and other consumable goods (especially local food or GIs (Amilien, 2013)) bought as gifts for relevant others. Finally, the traditional theory of consumers' demand (Leibenstein, 1950) had explained the phenomenon of 'conspicuous consumption' (Veblen effect) when increasing demand is driven by the increase in price. It is important to note that the Veblen effect indicates the importance of price as an extrinsic cue in consumer decision making, with product utility not being derived from its quality but from its price (so-called conspicuous price) and its symbolic signaling value for communicating social status, prestige, self-image, etc. In the context of food, this may refer to, for example, PDO and PGI food (we have, for instance, explicit examples with the PGI *Old Cheese from Vik* in Norway) but also various kinds of produce and food consumption patterns related to specific lifestyles.

Several studies have also pointed to the importance of gender identity (male and female), and local or global identity, affecting consumer price sensitivity (Gao et al., 2020). The results of some conducted research also indicate the willingness of consumers to pay more for fresher perishable food products (Scholz & Kulko, 2022). The price appears mainly as a barrier when buying organic food products, although organic consumers' price sensitivity is relatively lower than that of non-organic consumers. The willingness to pay a premium price for organic food is around 30% and depends on consumer segments and product categories (Aschemann-Witzel & Zielke, 2017). For example, Gerini, Alfnes, and Schjøll (2016) have found three different consumers segments in organic eggs market in Norway, including 1) consumers willing to pay premium prices for organic eggs, 2) a segment unwilling to pay more, and 3) consumers who avoid buying organic eggs even when their price is the same across the product category. Willingness to pay a premium price for labeled 'Organic' eggs shows low price sensitivity, while, in contrast, unwillingness may indicate high price sensitivity of consumers. Yet, it shows that price sensitivity is not necessarily related to particular food items (i.e., organic eggs) but may derive from other important factors, including personal, economic, and lifestyle characteristics of individual consumers. Along with it, focusing on specific market segments rather than the overall market and understanding individual consumers' choices and decision-making is highly important in food marketing.

Price sensitivity

Consumers' price sensitivity is a function of numerous economic, social, demographic, as well as personal or type of purchase/product-related factors. As such, the concept of price sensitivity is broadly embraced by marketing theory and research, calling for a deeper understanding of consumers' behaviour and decision-making affected by price changes. However, price sensitivity in marketing theory and research should not be directly related to the more robust concept of price elasticity as explained by standard economic theory. Thus, in addressing the issue of food consumers' price sensitivity, this chapter further builds upon collected qualitative data. On the other hand, understanding and analyzing food price elasticity would certainly call for quantitative data. Price elasticity of food regarded as a mandatory good is, however, out of the scope of this study, focusing on understanding social aspects of food choice and consumption regarding specific food products: i.e., Food Quality Schemes.

Think price:¹ importance of price in food-related decision making, choice of food products, purchase, preparation, and sustainable consumption

Marketing scholars explain price sensitivity *as the relative change in consumers' purchase quantity, purchase likelihood, or willingness to pay after a price increase* (Wakefield & Inman, 2003, according to Gao et al., 2017). Further, low price sensitivity is explained as an absence of such change, while high price sensitivity is

found when consumers refrain from further purchases because of increased prices. Considering *price an important determinant of consumers' choice that brings disutility to the consumer resulting in negative price sensitivity*, Wang and Van Der Lans (2018) also point at potential positive effects of price on choice utility. In their view, negative price sensitivity refers to situations when consumers refrain from purchasing due to a price increase, which was previously defined as high price sensitivity. On the other hand, positive price sensitivity explains situations when consumers' choice is determined by increasing the price. This, however, should also be understood as high price sensitivity, yet the relative change in consumers' purchase likelihood is positive rather than negative. Positive price sensitivity may also be explained by an established price-quality relationship (Chu et al., 2008), which is reflected in consumers' perception that pricy food products guarantee a higher food quality.

Earlier studies in the field of marketing also discussed the importance of access to information and the role of advertising in understanding and controlling consumers' price sensitivity. For example, Krishnamurthi and Raj (1985) found that the price-quality relationship played an important role, particularly when other product-related information was scarce, thus making the consumers less sensitive to prices. On the other hand, Kaul and Vittink (1995) found that price-related advertising may be used to increase price sensitivity, whereas non-price-related advertising may keep consumers less sensitive to prices.

While price sensitivity is affected by many factors, economic factors may well explain why consumers in lower-income countries show higher responsiveness to price changes (high price sensitivity). On the other hand, researchers have revealed the importance of social factors (cultural norms) claiming that price sensitivity is higher in countries with higher masculinity and uncertainty avoidance and is gender related as women have been found to be more price sensitive when purchasing grocery items (Kübler et al., 2018), while consumers' identity has also been found to influence price sensitivity (Gao et al., 2017).

In addition, different countries have different food cultures, which are to a great extent also related to the specific choice of food, food consumption patterns, as well as the price sensitivity of the local consumers. Divergences can be quite extreme with countries like France and Italy that have a strong tradition for designating the origin of the food products, while, for example, German consumers have a long experience of organic as a valuable food quality. Climate, the arable surface, or regulations are also elements which can explain local differences in everyday food practices, while the global food system also make several issues similar.

Food prices in the studied countries

The countries included in our study differ substantially by price level index for food, beverages and tobacco (Eurostat, 2024). For example, the respective price level index for food in Norway is higher than the EU average (Norway = 131 vs. EU average = 100). Prices are also higher in France, Germany, and Italy, as respective price level indexes for food revolve at around 103 (Germany), 104 (Italy) and

111% (France), while in Serbia and Hungary prices are lower (price level indexes for food equal 96 and 95 respectively). Figure 5.1 below shows price index levels for food and non-alcoholic beverages across Europe, while Table 5.1 presents population size, GDP per capita, and price indices for food for selected European countries (Norway, Germany, France, Italy, UK, Hungary, and Serbia).

Let the voices of the informants unfold

Diverse wordings, actions, attitudes, and behaviours regarding food choice, consumption patterns, and price sensitivity were found among food consumers included in our study, regardless of the countries covered. We have noted, for example, price-sensitive consumers from the UK and those not sensitive to prices from Serbia. Also, hedonic consumers were registered among the French, pragmatic among the Serbs, and convenience-oriented among consumers from Italy. Among Norwegians, we found one who claimed that it is time and efficiency that mainly influence the choice of food and purchase decisions. A Hungarian consumer showed scepticism toward organic food, while, from a German consumer’s

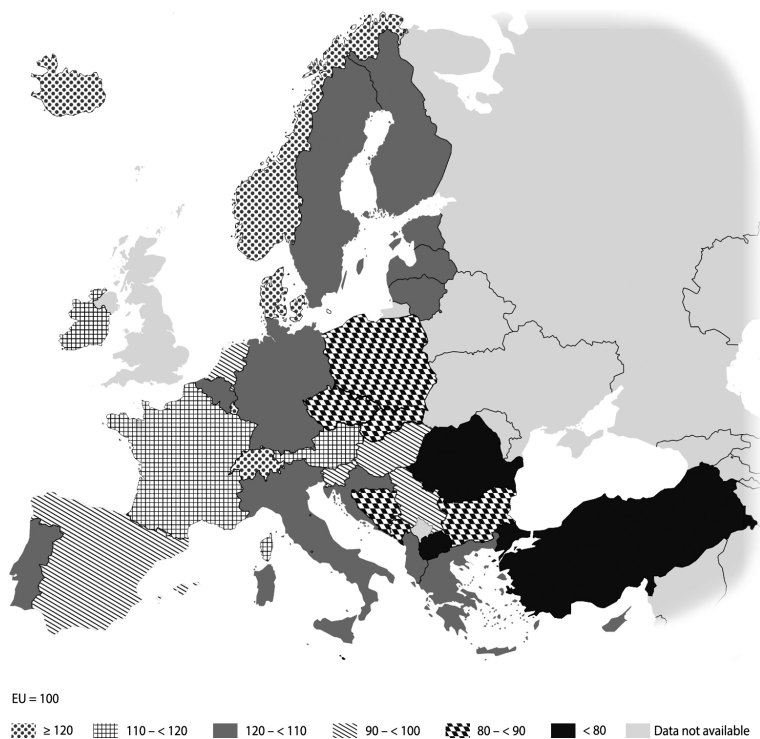


Figure 5.1 Price level indexes for food and beverages in Europe in 2024.

Source: World Bank; Eurostat.

Table 5.1 Population, GDP per capita, and price level indices for food in 2024

Country	Population (mil)	GDP per capita (USD)	Price index for food (EU = 100)
Norway	5.5	86,809	130.6
Germany	83.5	55,800	102.9
France	68.5	46,150	111.5
Italy	58.9	40,226	104.0
UK	69.2	52,637	NA
Hungary	9.6	23,311	93.9
Serbia	6.6	13,524	95.7

Source: World Bank; Eurostat.

perspective, organic does not necessarily mean a higher price. An Italian consumer was found to be sceptical about FQS, while, among the consumers from the UK and Hungary, some paid a great deal of attention to responsible purchasing and sustainable food consumption. These examples indicate that consumers' choice of organic and FQS is not necessarily a determinant of their price sensitivity and thus may be better explained by other important factors (e.g., education and level of knowledge, consumer attitudes, cultural norms, etc).

It is the reason why we choose, on purpose, to deliver 'raw' quotes from informants. As the reader has been introduced to our standard analytical and theoretical tools – both in the first part of the text and in Chapters 2 and 3 of this book – the next part builds on wordings as illustrations of thoughts. To allow the reader to understand, observe, and digest the different perspectives and understand the complexity emerging from the fieldwork, we just let you read, and hear, the words. Nevertheless, as the role of the researcher also is to simplify the complexity, we have grouped the original claims referring to consumers' price sensitivity listed below, by special sub-topics, concretely referring to: organic food, food quality schemes, sustainable consumption, consumers' rationality, ethical concerns, and personal preferences.

Let's also recall that low price sensitivity is described as a willingness to pay for FQS, which may be frequently noted in many statements of our informants listed below. However, while, at a discursive level, most participants accept the idea of paying more for better quality, their real behaviour when shopping did not support their statements. That is to say, while purchasing, price was, on a few occasions, not so pertinent (if we had fieldwork in a special shop or at a farmer's market), but often decisive for what they ended up choosing in supermarkets. We mean it is important to specify this – also further developed in our common work on 'sayings and doings' (Amilien et al., 2022) – to balance the weight of wordings while studying practices.

So let's hear what our informants have to say about thinking price (accompanied by Figures 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5).



Figure 5.2 Reduced price for sustainable consumption: organic mozzarella on special offer due to expiry date chosen to reduce food waste in Italy.

Source: University of Parma – Strength2Foods own data from fieldwork in Italy.

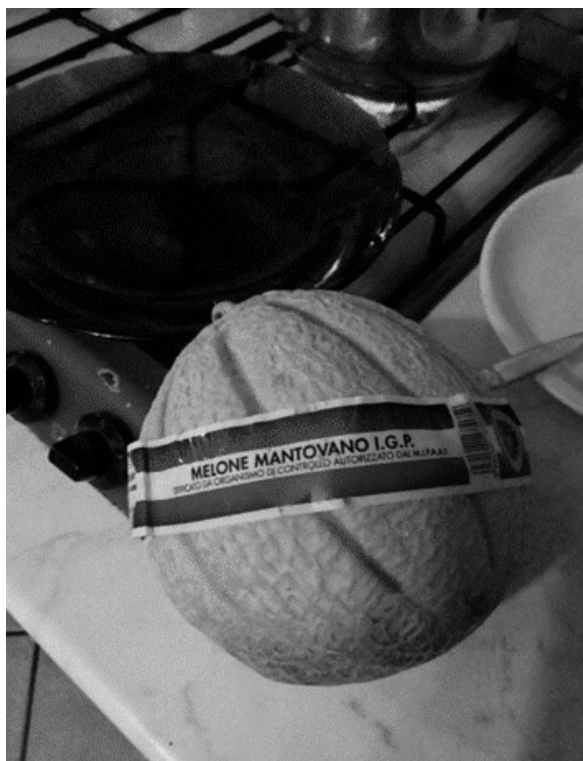


Figure 5.3 Labeling food for communicating quality: PGI melon consumed by a family in Italy.

Source: University of Parma – Strength2Food's own data from fieldwork in Italy.

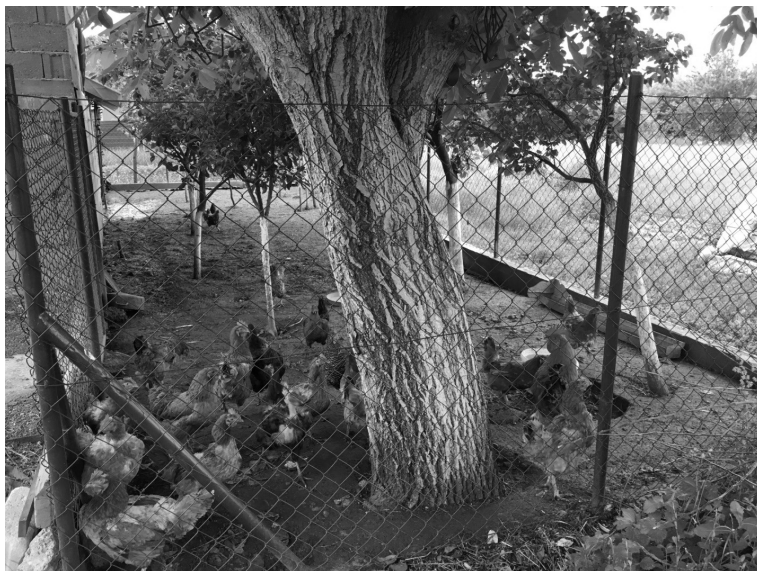


Figure 5.4 Family food production in Serbia: small orchards and animal breeding for family consumption.

Source: University of Belgrade – Strength2Food’s own data from fieldwork in Serbia.



Figure 5.5 Zimnica saves family budget: Serbian homemade sweets and preserves (fruits and vegetables) prepared for family consumption in the winter period.

Source: University of Belgrade – Strength2Food’s own data from fieldwork in Serbia.

Organic food

The first thing that will spring to mind is that it is going to be twice the price, and normally it is... [And despite the superior quality] because of the price, you wouldn't get it.

(UK, H3)

My friend, they buy all organic things, but they don't have children yet and she said that they spend a fortune... [but recently] she's started to switch now because she wants to save a little more money.

(UK, H2)

Organic is an unnecessary increase in the price for an average quality product.

(Hungary, HX)

No, there are also organic private label cold cuts, they are not more expensive, and that is affordable.

(Germany, HX)

We are not financially constrained. We pay close attention to what we eat. We try to buy high-quality food. We buy organic. We don't buy in bulk because we have limited storage space, and the stores are nearby (on the ground floor of the building).

(Serbia, H1)

We usually buy food from people whose animals we know how they grow, whose meat and eggs [organic] we eventually eat. It all reflects on the quality of the product ... [yet] we are not much of a meat-eating family. We don't have to eat meat all the time. So, in that sense, this doesn't affect our household budget much because the amounts are not as great.

(Serbia, H3)

If I can, I buy everything directly from the producer As a second choice, there is the small local shop, then the supermarket in my area And then at the bottom there's the GMO, the discount, where I go only if forced.

(Italy, H3)

Food quality schemes

If you want good ajvar [a preserve made of peppers], it costs 500 dinars [around €4.20], whereas the bad one is 114 dinars [around €0.95].

(Serbia, H5).

The fact that a product is labeled PDO or PGI or organic is, for me, a secondary criterion. I have met producers who got out of bio [organic] because it was expensive, institutions ask some thousand euros per year for nothing concrete. So, I have lots of doubts about certifications.

(Italy, H3)

For example, when I see kashkavals that cost up to several thousands of dinars. I would perhaps try them, but you can always buy fine cheese for much less money.

(Serbia, H3)

We usually buy food from people whose animals we know how they grow, whose meat and eggs we eventually eat. It all reflects on the quality of the product. [In comparison with conventional products, these are] significantly more expensive.

(Serbia, H3)

No, I never focus on the price. When I buy something, I try to go for 100% natural and nice products. We try to buy high-quality food. We save money on everything, but never on food.

(Serbia, H6)

If I get a labeled product, which therefore costs more than the others, I'm more careful when I use it. For example, when I buy Grana Padano, I take care it doesn't get moldy.

(Italy, H1)

We know that Delhaize has its Premia brand [private label], ajvar produced in Macedonia, which is excellent and yet comes at an affordable price. This is why we buy only that brand of ajvar. It really tastes as if it were homemade.

(Serbia, H3)

Sustainable consumption

It is more expensive to buy fruits from the farmer's market, so I buy only as much as we certainly will eat.

(Hungary, HX)

I'm quite conscious of it. I hate to throw things out. So, I'll only try and buy what we need.

(UK, H6)

I am very practical when it comes to food. We buy as much as we can eat. We don't pile up supplies.

(Serbia, H4)

Let's say that I tend to waste nothing: we eat the whole fruit with the skin, we eat fava beans with the skin, and we also eat the leaves of radishes. We have as low a waste level as possible. That's because the food we buy is never cheap.

(Italy, H3)

We don't do bulk shopping to save money. We usually buy smaller quantities of groceries. I usually do the shopping after work.

(Serbia, H4)

It happens sometimes that some of the food is left, but we usually eat it later for dinner. On occasions, I cook lunch for two days, to make it easier for me, as well, but it's something that can be kept in the refrigerator.

(Serbia, H3)

I reuse leftovers to make something else. For example, if Carlo doesn't eat the whole steak, I can make breaded cutlets or meatballs out of it. If we have some leftover pasta, we eat it again at dinnertime, but I certainly don't throw it away because we can give it to the dog.

(Italy, H1)

We breed animals. Mother has an entire range of animals so nothing is wasted in the dumpster.

(Serbia, H5)

Consumers' rationality

Our choices have something to do with time and place, and how much time you have. [When time is limited, you choose based on] price, price, price.

(Norway, H5)

In reality, we tend to buy... what we are used to, we often buy loose from supermarket counters; they precisely have a label rouge for marbled ham which is very, very good and that we like quite a lot ... And when our budget gets tighter, we also buy regular items, in fact.

(France, HX)

Yes, yes, I like that, when a wine maker talks to me about his wine, counsels me, and ... it is true that it wouldn't occur to me to buy wine from a supermarket. I don't know. I'm prepared to pay more in ... at a wine cellar, or other networks, rather than buy it in a supermarket.

(France, H1)

We live in a region where salaries are low. They sell the products at lower prices at the end of working hours or something. For example, we buy old bread from a baker that is always cheaper on the following day. So, for our animals (pigs), we buy bread that normally costs 50 dinars, but after three days it's ten dinars. It depends on the seller whether to offer something at a lower price or not.

(Serbia, H5)

Either you can cook, or you can't. If you can't cook ... I see people who have very little money and yet buy ready to eat stuff, that is not very good and that explodes their food budget.

(France, H1)

[To save money] we make our juices, grow potatoes and tomatoes.

(Serbia, H2)

[I go shopping] when I get a pay check. Once a month, we do bulk shopping. The rest when we need it.

(Serbia, H2)

Or if we were having friends round or doing something nice, then I'd ... it's like this is all special stuff that wouldn't go in our normal basic weekly shop, which unfortunately is a bit ruled by money and kids, I don't know.

(UK, H4)

I usually go shopping for groceries when I go to pick up my kid from school. Now there are some people who bring us vegetables from the marketplace so that we don't have to go there by ourselves. Not organic, but it comes from two verified farms. On top of it, they don't charge for delivery.

(Serbia, H3)

Ethical concerns and personal preferences

If we were to cook every day, I'm sure we would pay more attention to where we bought meat, the prices etc. But the price isn't important for this one lunch that we cook at home. During the week, we buy ready-made cooked dishes in Maxi.

(Serbia, H4)

Sometimes we buy that big piece of meat because it is more convenient or it's in discount. But actually, there is no convenience at all because after we eat part of it, I should freeze the remaining part. But if I don't remember to do it immediately, I throw it away.

(Italy, H4)

I personally feel better when I buy something at the farmers' market than in the supermarket, because I get the impression that I helped the seller more than by giving my money to a large food store chain.

(Serbia, H4)

How can we get consumers to want to buy sustainable products and how can we get producers to produce sustainable food...? It is about economy and the producer's intention, and the consumer's intention is often in conflict

because the consumer wants to pay as little as possible and the producer wants to earn as much as possible.

(Norway, H5)

Buying Italian and 0 km products is a way to enhance local economy, to improve sustainability and to lower the environmental impact of the production.

(Italy, H4)

I buy fruit from a person who keeps an illegal stall in front of our building because I contacted her, asked her where she cultivated her corn, cherries, and sour cherries... She said that she has an orchard outside Belgrade. Perhaps it's a kind of empathy for people who grow their own food, produce it, and join the market on their own, because my grandma used to keep a stall at Zeleni venac [marketplace in downtown Belgrade]. We had an orchard. My grandpa would pick the fruit and bring it to the market. This is why I appreciate this kind of work.

(Serbia, H4)

Price still matters!

In conclusion, it could be said that, ultimately, price remains a cornerstone of food practices. It plays a pivotal role in shaping both food purchasing decisions and the pursuit of sustainable consumption. While the 'food quality comes first' discourse is a standard among interviewed European consumers, in many instances, they are still quite concerned about prices, especially about FQS.

Price sensitivity is a multifaceted phenomenon. Consumers may be price sensitive under various conditions and depending on purchase situations (e.g., high or low involvement products, buying for oneself or others, purchasing offline or online, local/homemade or industrial products, etc). In addition, as the above-listed claims suggest, food consumer price sensitivity may also result from their personal values as well as personal and family lifestyles.

However, price sensitivity may have both a negative and a positive sign. Negative price sensitivity (i.e., high price sensitivity) reflects the changes in quantity of purchased items. The negative price sensitivity may even lead to consumers refraining from purchase because of the increased price. Yet, price increase may also positively affect one's willingness to purchase, as in the case of luxury goods (which is known as the Veblen effect). While food in general, referred to as mandatory goods, certainly does not follow this pattern, there are specific food items that could be regarded as luxury (including those aimed for gift giving, such as chocolates, sweets, labeled dairy, and meat products, but also food promoting specific lifestyles). In line with it, positive price sensitivity may result from existing consumer values, such as, for example, traditionalism and nostalgia, hedonism, health, ethical consumption, or ecology-conscious consumption. Further, as previously noted, positive price sensitivity may also be explained by an established

price-quality relationship. On the other hand, price sensitivity may also be lowered using advertising messages focusing on quality, brand, and/or symbolic values rather than the product price.

While consumers' notions on FQS in general, as well as their overall price sensitivity toward specific food and food items, shopping behaviour, and food consumption differ substantially among our informants, price sensitivity remains an important aspect of FQS. Therefore, further deployment and growing acceptance of FQS by European consumers is highly dependent on proper food marketing, based, among other issues, on determining the right pricing strategy.

Note

- 1 This title is driven from a famous slogan – 'Think Small.'

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6 The geography of taste

Ethnocentric food choices and local identity

Aron Török and Zalán Márk Maró

Introduction

Human behaviour and making choices in different situations are motivated by numerous factors (e.g., cultural, psychological, physical, and social factors). Consumer ethnocentrism refers to consumers' beliefs about the appropriateness and morality of purchasing non-domestic or foreign-made products. This often leads to judging other cultures based on our own value systems, resulting in misunderstandings, prejudice, and stereotypes. Ethnocentrism can manifest in attitudes, behaviour, or policies that favour one culture over others. While it can contribute to strengthening cultural identity, ethnocentrism can lead to conflict, discrimination, or social inequality.

One of the important issues in the international economy and marketing is the tendency of customers to prefer local products and brands over foreign ones, which means that purchasing decisions depend not only on price or quality but also on the place of origin or country of the products¹. Due to the increasing role of globalisation and the increasing emphasis on nationalism and cultural identity, consumer ethnocentrism plays an important role in global and local markets, especially nowadays, when economic downturns and crises are encouraging governments to take protectionist measures and practices.

The field studies of the H2020 project Strength2Food highlight that European consumers are positive about choosing local, regional, or national food products instead of products that have been imported and transported, and these factors often result in ethnocentric behaviour. Principally, quality, support, and trust are the main components of ethnocentric preferences. Moreover, our informants mostly select local or regional products because of the name and the quality they are familiar with: reputation, habit, and tradition prevail over the fact that those products are part of food quality schemes.

1 <!--StartFragment-->It is interesting to note the concept of gastronativism proposed by Fabio Parasecoli in one of his recent works (Parasecoli 2022). There are undoubtedly parallels with ethnocentrism, but we have not explored the topic in depth, as while gastronativism is a conscious and politicised strategy, using food for identity or nationalist purpose, ethnocentrism in the context of food is more of an attitude, not necessarily a conscious one.<

Well-known food products in the possession of geographical indication (e.g., Parmigiano-Reggiano and Grana Padano cheese, both with a Protected Designation of Origin label) are usually perceived as high-quality products by domestic consumers, because they are local and because of the longstanding quality reputation of the designation, rather than because of the European Union's quality labels. In addition, in many countries, the self-production of different foodstuffs played an important role as self-produced food was considered the most valuable and of the highest quality.

This chapter aims to explore the role and meaning of ethnocentrism, especially regarding the use and purchase of Food Quality Schemes (FQS). Previous literature underlines that more ethnocentric consumers show less willingness to purchase foreign products and have favourable cognitive, normative, and emotional attitudes toward domestic products. In contrast, consumers with strong ethnocentrism tend to consider purchasing non-domestic products to be harmful, 'non-ethnic' behaviour. Concerning foodstuffs and beverages, consumers in the developed world usually prefer domestic products to imported products, while, in some developing countries, people are less ethnocentric because they consider their domestic products to be of lower quality than imported ones from developed countries. In general, ethnocentrism appears as a market segmentation tool in purchasing and marketing practices. This chapter builds on participant observation and discussions with 41 households in 7 European countries, collected through ethnographic data collection within the H2020 project Strength2Food (see Chapters 1 and 2 to understand what we can learn about consumer ethnocentrism for everyday food practices).

The concept of ethnocentrism and consumer ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is a fundamental aspect of the social sciences, and there is a tendency for consumers to prefer local brands and products over those from foreign countries. Ethnocentric behaviour was increasingly disappearing in the globalised world (e.g., Fukuyama (1992) proclaimed the End of History and the triumph of capitalism). However, the economic and social changes that took place after the 2000s reversed the phenomenon. A good example of this is the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (EU) or the COVID-19 pandemic, when many countries suddenly closed their borders. Even the countries of the EU, many of which are highly homogenous ethnically, have been building a trans-ethnic identity for decades. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, many European decision-makers or leaders closed their country's borders, urged the stockpiling of various supplies (such as medicines or basic foodstuffs); countries in need (e.g., developing countries where intervention would have been necessary) were either completely rejected or helped only to a small extent by these European actors (Bizumic et al., 2021). According to Bizumic (2019), the world has never been more interconnected and globalised, and ethnocentric attitudes and tendencies towards globalisation are closely linked.

Many people associate the appearance of ethnocentrism with William Graham Sumner (1906), who is undoubtedly an important actor in the case of this

phenomenon, played only a significant role in spreading ethnocentrism. Instead, the phenomenon and concept of ethnocentrism were most likely given their names ('Ethnocentrismus' in German and 'etnocentryzm' in Polish in the publications) in the 19th century by Ludwig Gumplowicz (Gumplowicz, 1879; Gumplowicz, 1881). Gumplowicz compared ethnocentrism to Anthropocentrism (human-centred; humankind is the central or most important entity in the universe) and Geocentrism (Earth is the centre of the universe and the world system); thus, in the case of ethnocentrism, one's own ethnos or ethnic group is the focus. Every person, social group, or nation regards itself as the most splendid and superior and thinks itself is the best. An example of this is that in the 19th (and after that the 20th) centuries, Western powers often approached their colonised territories with an ethnocentric approach. The European countries believed that their own culture and value system was superior and tried to impose it on the colonised territories.

After that, Sumner's (1906) concept and definition of ethnocentrism were built on Gumplowicz, according to which ethnocentrism is the technical name for this view of things in which one's group is the centre of everything. Sumner (1911, p. 11) also mentioned the concept of ingroup (the superior group) and outgroup (people over whom we are superior): 'The sentiment of cohesion, internal comradeship, and devotion to the ingroup, which carries with it a sense of superiority to any outgroup and readiness to defend the interests of the ingroup against the outgroup, is technically known as ethnocentrism.'

Several authors can be singled out in the further development of ethnocentrism. Adorno et al. (1950) created a scale for ethnocentrism as an expression of authoritarianism. According to the authors, ethnocentrism is part of a person's ideological system, influenced by childhood experiences, which is an important, all-pervading personality trait. In Gumplowicz's and Sumner's theory, the competition of different people or groups played an important role. LeVine and Campbell (1972) also emphasise, based on the realistic group conflict theory, that ethnocentrism is triggered by the competition of individuals or groups for scarce resources (for example, jobs).

In the 1980s, Shimp and Sharma laid the foundations of consumer ethnocentrism and a scale to measure it. According to Shimp (1984) on consumer ethnocentrism:

The concept is used here to represent consumers' normative beliefs in the superiority of their own countries' products... That is, consumer ethnocentrism is intended to capture the notion that some consumers believe it is somehow wrong to purchase foreign-made products. It will hurt the domestic economy, cause the loss of jobs, and, in short, because, from their view, it is plainly unpatriotic.

Later, the two authors (Shimp and Sharma, 1987) defined consumer ethnocentrism as the beliefs of consumers regarding the appropriateness, indeed morality, of purchasing foreign products (Shimp and Sharma, 1987).

More ethnocentric people are less willing to choose and purchase products from foreign countries and prefer products from their own countries or countries that

have similar cultures and objects. Even, buying imported products is considered an unpatriotic behaviour because it leads to job losses and negatively affects a country's national economy and economic environment. Next to Shimp and Sharma, nationalism and patriotism have been linked by many authors to ethnocentrism. This states that demographic and cultural differences explain the decisions of consumers in different countries. Nationalism (consumers are willing to make sacrifices to buy local or national products) and patriotism (consumers consider domestic products of higher quality) can be considered an integral part of consumer ethnocentrism and affect attitude, purchasing behaviour, and action (Balabanis et al., 2001; Rawwas et al., 1996). Ethnocentrism has a complex but clear relationship with consumer ethnocentrism (Bizumic, 2019). The dimensions of ethnocentrism may lead to different mediating variables (e.g., ethnic ingroup positivity, national ingroup positivity, nationalism, or prejudice against foreigners), which could enhance and strengthen consumer ethnocentrism.

Shimp and Sharma's (1987) Consumers' Ethnocentric Tendencies Scale (CETSCALE) is most often used in the literature, despite several authors (Cleveland et al., 2009; Saffu & Walker, 2005; Siamagka & Balabanis, 2015) having called for a review of conceptual re-examination and its measurement to measure consumer ethnocentrism. Despite numerous theoretical and practical applications, as well as multiple calls for a conceptual re-evaluation of consumer ethnocentrism, it has remained essentially unchanged since its inception in 1987. All this has resulted in the fact that there are authors who believe that ethnocentrism is not one-dimensional (unidimensional), and there is already evidence of its multidimensional structure. Firstly, consumer ethnocentrism was defined as a three-dimensional (affective reaction, behavioural preference, and cognitive bias dimensions) construct (Sharma, 2015), after that as a five-dimensional (cognition, habituation, insecurity, prosociality, and reflexiveness) construct (Siamagka & Balabanis, 2015).

Some authors (Bizumic, 2019; Bizumic et al., 2009; Bizumic & Duckitt, 2012) present ethnocentrism as a six-dimensional concept. According to Bizumic (2019), ethnocentrism is a distinct, multidimensional concept that encompasses both mere ingroup positivity and outgroup prejudice, and it pertains exclusively to ethnic groups. There are two intragroup dimensions of ethnocentrism (devotion and group cohesion), and there are intergroup dimensions of ethnocentrism (preference, superiority, purity, and exploitativeness).

Ethnocentrism and ethnocentric tendencies among consumers

Concerning foodstuffs and beverages, consumers in developed countries (e.g., the states of the European Union) usually prefer domestic products to imported products (Fernández-Ferrín et al., 2018; Thøgersen et al., 2019), while in some developing countries, people are less ethnocentric because they consider their domestic products to be of lower quality than imported ones from developed countries (Wang & Chen, 2004). Taking socio-demographic factors into account, the literature has concluded that ethnocentrism is more prevalent among people of older

age, women, people with lower education, and people with lower income (see more in Annex 6.1).

Several studies (Maró et al., 2023; Olšovský et al., 2022; Czine et al., 2024) have also shown that ethnocentrism appears more among consumers living in villages or smaller towns. Ethnocentrism is even less characteristic of consumers living in larger cities (e.g., populations over a million), which can be explained by globalization and the many foreign products and brands appearing because of it, as well as the many purchasing opportunities. According to Ma et al. (2020), global-minded consumers of developing countries are less ethnocentric than local-minded consumers. The impacts of consumer ethnocentrism on consumer attitude are well established; the markets of the developing countries are more complex regarding ethnocentric behaviour; thus, to bypass the negative impact of consumer ethnocentrism when marketing, international companies have to focus on global-minded consumers.

Consumer ethnocentrism plays a significant role in determining whether to choose local or regional foodstuffs and beverages over non-local ones (Pieniak et al., 2009). In addition, there is a growing interest in local and regional food (see the results of the Strength2Food project), which is opposed to globalization, metropolitan life, or the presence of the modern food industry. Local food production, manufacture, tradition, and attachment to the product's region of origin can represent strong elements of local (or country) identity and culture. According to Fernández-Ferrín et al. (2018), the level of consumer ethnocentrism, in many cases, is related to the purchase of these traditional, local, or regional foodstuffs and beverages.

Thøgersen et al. (2019) reached similar results. According to the authors, the country of origin (COO) effect strongly influences preferences towards local products, which is rooted in consumer ethnocentrism, but also, as in the case of SFSC products, in environmental concern and trust in institutions for quality certifications and control. At the same time, Czine et al. (2024) and Maró et al. (2023) came to a similar result in the case of a national product with a GI label. In this case, a higher level of ethnocentric behaviour increases the level of utility attributed to the existence of the GI label.

However, according to numerous authors, the ethnocentric tendencies and feelings described above and present in the global world also contain dangers. According to Bizumic (2019):

many people are strongly attached to their ethnic groups and appear to be unhappy with the turn that globalization, including the global consumer culture, are taking. Not only do they find themselves estranged from the globalized world, but they are also working against it and may threaten economic growth and stability. Accordingly, unless their voices are heard and listened to, a further resurgence in ethnocentrism and its sway over people's decisions and behaviours is likely.

Laya & Draper (2017) indicate that, amid growing discontent over globalization, the outlook for global trade is darkening, with implications for economic growth, peace, and stability. And, finally, Ashuro (2021) draws attention to the fact that ‘ethnocentric attitudes were (and are) enforced by wrong use of agenda of ethnic parties, ethnic federalism, social media, ethnic literatures, and ethnic based sport clubs.’

What consumers think and say

The Strength2Food project allowed us to empirically validate what consumers think and say about everyday food consumption, and based on their sayings, we can illustrate how these consumers think about ethnocentrism. The 41 households across 7 European countries are well described by their thoughts concerning food in the national and EU nexus, their country of origin, and localness.

Boltanski & Thévenot (2006) proposed six different worlds of worth, representing different conventions and contextual frames of thought (see also chapters 3 and 8). Out of these, the ‘domestic’ world of worth is the closest to the concept of ethnocentrism introduced in the previous chapter. This well describes many of the informants’ views (Table 6.1).

Ethnocentrism might be captured in many of the dimensions investigated in the S2F project.

When a **national and an EU-wide** label for similar product characteristics co-exist, consumers recognise (and often prefer) the domestic one:

This [German Label] I know from everywhere. This [EU-Organic] is not so striking. Ok, if you pay attention to it... this [German Label] is always visible on top [of the product], this catches my eye quite often.

(Germany)

Table 6.1 Ethnocentrism-related world of worth

<i>World of worth</i>	<i>Pillar</i>	<i>Means of being valuable in this world</i>	<i>Values (moral) / objectives</i>	<i>Bad values</i>	<i>Key words</i>
Domestic	Transmission Reproduction	Tradition Hierarchy Family	Trust Know-how Gentleness Kindness	Against innovation Vulgarity	Loyalty, family, trust, education, transmission of knowledge, gestural know-how

Source: Own composition based on Boltanski and Thévenot (2006)

In some of the EU member states, national quality labels were introduced much earlier than the EU logos; therefore, the national labels are more recognised:

and really since France, the Ministry of Agriculture has taken up the management of the logo AB, or has abandoned ... because under the logo AB there is nothing left now under the logo AB. Because today it is the European logo, you see. This is why [X] uses the logo AB because the French know what it means ... that this logo prevails.

(France, p. 9, Bernard)

In Norway, even though the European Organic label in several cases was visible next to the Ø-label, the participants would more often associate the Ø-label with organic values. This label was given considerable trust, while the EU Organic was mentioned as suspicious due to its connotations of a 'foreign' label. Locally originated organic labels were preferred:

Many years ago, I participated in a survey when Coop was launching their new organic products, and they had the Änglamark brand on the table, and I was supposed to answer questions about what I thought about the name and such ... I do not know how to explain it, but from that time on, I felt a bit of ownership over the brand.

(Norway, H5)

Trustworthiness might also be linked to ethnocentrism, sometimes in an extended way:

If a product is organic but produced in extra-EU countries, it doesn't seem to me as trustworthy.

(Italy, H3)

Country of origin often plays a distinctive role for ethnocentric consumers. Country of origin refers to the country from which the product originated, and usually, it is used when the origin is associated with a high reputation. This high reputation is widely accepted, even among consumers not living in the producing countries, and therefore has a high marketing value. The EU's PDO and PGI label also links the product with its geographical origin. For consumers, this origin often matters even if the product comes from their own country:

I think if I were a fan of Italy and if I knew this [label] or the area, then I would be more likely to pay attention to it. But normally I would think 'I need Parmesan Cheese.'

(Germany)

Instead, well-known national products (often labelled with domestic logos) are part of the traditional food baskets, even if they are more expensive:

In reality, we tend to buy ... what we are used to, we often buy loose from supermarket counters; they precisely have a label rouge for marbled ham, which is very good and that we like quite a lot ... And when our budget gets tighter, we also buy regular items, in fact.

(France)

However, sometimes, it is hard to distinguish whether a product is domestic, as the labels/logos/trademarks are confusing:

Dagny: [about the dried cod] This does not have an NN label, but it is very Norwegian.

R: You say very Norwegian, how do you know that?

Dagny: Lofoten, it says Lofoten, although it is probably not produced in Norway.

David: It may be shipped abroad and prepared somewhere.

Dagny: Do you know what, it is not Norwegian, and it is produced in Iceland for Lofotprodukt AS. Yes... but it is funny reading things like this, it is very deceptive... when I think about Lofoten, I believe that it is very Norwegian.

(Norway, H3, *Dagny*).

In case the origin-related misbelief is recognised, it has a clear impact on purchasing decisions:

Dagny: The dried cod, yes, the one that was not produced in Norway.

R: Do you remember it?

Dagny: Yes, I will never forget it, it is pretty dismal ... we do not buy dried cod now as it is not from Lofoten, it was disappointing

(Norway, H3).

Going beyond domestic, **localness** (being regional) is also generally valued by consumers. Essentially, when the farmers produce their food in the same region where the final consumers live, it could mean the closest connection. Being local, therefore, is sometimes valued more than possessing a quality label:

I trust local products more. If I have to go and buy ham or salami, I go to whom I know nearby. I would rather do it in this way instead of going to the supermarket and buying the DOP products I trust the local product without a known label, but with a producer I know. For example, I buy honey because I know the producer, I buy it even if it doesn't have any labels.

(Italy, H1)

However, the borders between being domestic or local are not easy to distinguish:

I was thinking of local to the NorthEast, but actually local can mean buying British, can't it.

(UK, H6)

Localness often means something related to 'home;' therefore, for ethnic minorities living in other countries, localness represents their original home:

Because you know, here we eat Senegalese type cuisine, not typical Italian. Occasionally I eat pasta at home. But not always. The Senegalese community has the chance to have everything they have there in Senegal, the Chinese have brought food products here... in their Chinese store.'

(Italy, H5)

Supporting locals (e.g., farmers) is a key element in both the SFSC concept and in ethnocentrism:

Yes well, it is precisely the protection of the environment. Because transportation is shorter, because we also support local production.... The farmers in [small town] or in...

(France, Tiphaine)

The nearer, the better... It depends, if there are German and French apples, I would buy the German ones.

(Germany)

Buying Italian and 0 km products is a way to enhance local economy, to improve sustainability, and to lower the environmental impact of the production.

(Italy, H4)

Being local, in general, is more trusted:

The local brand gives me more confidence because we need less information compared to a product that comes from elsewhere. You can trust something more when you know where it comes from.

(Italy, H2)

I don't often buy ham. And when that happens, I buy it in a local shop, as I trust the shopkeeper who chooses the ham himself. I don't know what brand it is from.... The problem with Gragnano pasta PGI is its origin: Campania. I would need a further guarantee to buy it, as I don't know the producers and I don't trust them. I'm sorry about that, but I can't buy it. The fact of knowing the producer gives me extra trust, because it's all based on a relationship of trust.

(Italy, H3)

Religious rules and historical heritages might also influence the choice of foods that are allowed or expected to be consumed:

If I know this product is not halal or has pork in it, I do not buy it for sure, I do not eat it, I do not buy it anymore. While, occasionally, when I go there [to

the Arab butcher's shops], you do not have to worry, from Arabic you know you eat Halal, it's Halal, so there's no pork. That's for sure.

(Italy, H5)

The most valued food items are usually the ones produced by the consumer himself/herself or received from a close family member:

I never buy vegetables... for instance, tomatoes in winter, they have no taste. I only buy seasonal vegetables. When I buy them. Because in the summer, I have my garden.

(France, Léa)

I almost never buy fruits and vegetables because my parents have a vegetable garden, and I get those from them. I get it fresh or frozen from them, so I have it for the whole year.

(Italy, H1)

Conclusion

Nowadays, faced with challenged by globalisation and the development of global consumer culture, ethnocentric sentiments and tendencies are increasingly decisive. This chapter investigated the impact of ethnocentrism on food consumption, based on the results of the Strength2Food (S2F) project, which included 41 households from 7 European countries. It has also provided significant insights into the connections between cultural identity, consumer behaviour, and sustainable food consumption. Ethnocentrism, which is the belief in the superiority of an individual's cultural group, fundamentally influences the preference for local, regional, and national foodstuffs and beverages. Furthermore, according to the academic literature, the highest level of ethnocentrism is related to the preference for local (or regional) food products. This chapter has shown how such attitudes and trends shape consumer decisions, and the opportunities and challenges they pose for (sustainable) food systems.

European consumers tend to prefer local products over imported ones. This is not only due to their beliefs about the quality of the product, but also due to cultural values and beliefs (e.g., heritage, supporting the community, tradition, and trust) associated with the products. Quality labels such as the PDO or PGI label further strengthen the commitment to local or regional products. However, ethnocentrism is not limited to specific, certified products since consumers surveyed in the project also often made their purchasing decisions based on personal relationships, such as purchasing from nearby producers. Moreover, ethnocentric consumer behaviour can, in many cases, promote sustainability. Choosing local products could reduce transport distances, thereby reducing carbon emissions and ecological footprint. The S2F project found that moral and environmental considerations often drive

such choices. Another interesting aspect is that, in addition to sustainability considerations, trust and preservation of traditions also played an important role in ethnocentric decisions. Consumers often preferred products that they knew personally or had direct contact with the producers of. This tendency was particularly strong in countries where local producers and small farms traditionally have strong ties to local communities.

However, ethnocentrism is not without its challenges, especially in a globalised world where international trade and cultural diversity play a key role. Resistance to globalisation can sometimes lead to protectionism and a narrowing of consumer choice. Country of origin indications are primarily designed to reach consumers of the export markets; however, it is widely observed that these labels are more valued by consumers of the country of origin. The S2F project has shown that foreign or EU-level certifications are less well-known and accepted than national labels, despite often representing stricter sustainability criteria. For example, in Norway, trust in local organic labels was much higher than in EU labels, which were perceived as foreign and less trustworthy. This trend was also observed in several other countries, where local labels were better known and accepted than international certifications.

The S2F project has made a significant contribution to understanding the role of country of origin and ethnocentrism in food consumption. While ethnocentrism can have a positive impact on sustainability, it requires a careful approach to ensure that local preferences do not preclude solutions that support global sustainability goals. Consumer education, transparent labelling, and the promotion of cultural diversity can play a key role in this process. Consumers, especially those with ethnocentric tendencies, need to be shown the benefits behind sustainability labels and how they promote environmental and social justice goals. This approach may be particularly important in countries where the cultural significance of local products is strong, but sustainability considerations are less emphasised. In summary, ethnocentrism as an analytical framework could shed new light on the possibilities for shaping sustainable food systems while helping to address the challenges of globalisation.

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Annex 6.1 Relationship between socio-demographic factors and ethnocentrism in the case of different countries

<i>Author (Year)</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Product/ Service</i>	<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Relationship between socio-demographic and ethnocentrism</i>			
				<i>Age</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Income</i>
Good and Huddleston (1995)	Poland, Russia	General	947	Older	Lower	Female	Lower
Caruana (1996) Watson and Wright (2000)	Malta	General	350	None	Lower	None	None
	New-Zealand	Refrigerators, televisions, and cameras	421	Older	Lower	None	None
Balabanis et al. (2001)	Turkey, Czech Republic	General	783	Older	None	Female	Lower
Supphellen and Gronhaug (2003) Erdogan and Uzkurt (2010) Josiassen et al. (2011) Rasković et al. (2016)	Russia	General	211	None	None	None	Higher
	Turkey	General	283	Older	Not exam.	None	Not exam.
	Australia	General	361	Older	Lower	Female	Lower
	China, Slovenia, Croatia,	General	929	Older	Not exam.	Female	None
	Macedonia	FMCGs (e.g., toiletries, cosmetics, and soft drinks)		Older	Not exam.	Not exam.	Not exam.
Shan Ding (2017)	China	Groceries, laptops, luxury products	347	Older	Not exam.	Not exam.	Not exam.
Mucha et al. (2020) (Akbarov, 2022)	Hungary	Food products	1001	None	Lower	None	None
	Azerbaijan	Clothing, food, technology, cleaning, construction, and medical products	467	Older	Not exam.	None	None
Alam et al. (2022) Maró et al. (2023)	Bangladesh	Electronic products	172	Older	Lower	None	None
	Hungary	Palinka (GI alcoholic beverages)	1000	Older	Lower	None	None
Czine et al. (2024)	Hungary	National and GI food products	1000	Older	Lower	None	Lower

Source: own composition

Bridge 1

Virginie Amilien and Monia Saïdi

This first section is unique in that all the chapters are rooted in the same research project, Strength2Food, and follow an unconventional structure. Some chapters delve into shared theoretical and methodological approaches, while others, more empirical in nature, give precedence to the narratives and voices of the informants. Ideally, we would have offered a theoretical framework allowing readers to conduct their own analysis of the narratives, but such an endeavour is not easily achieved in a scientific volume. We therefore opted for a compromise: a shared theoretical chapter, followed by empirical chapters that contextualise their themes through numerous quotations. This bridge invites readers to engage with our own analysis, which we have further developed in a jointly written article (Amilien et al., 2022).

In Part I, we sought to illuminate the role of Food Quality Schemes (FQS) in everyday food practices, exploring both the routinised nature of these practices and the ways participants navigate between different regimes of engagement: the regime of familiarity (non-reflexive routines), the regime of planned action (rational and intentional decisions), and the regime of justification (ethical values and discourses on the common good). It became evident that FQS often remain peripheral to participants' everyday practices, rarely integrated into routines through the labels themselves. Instead, products are frequently consumed for personal reasons – knowing the producer, regional attachment – reasons typically independent of the presence of a label. Perceived as impersonal, labels struggle to act as perceptual cues within the regime of familiarity but find their relevance in specific contexts, such as special occasions or ethical reflections.

We also observed that 'bifurcations' – major life events such as marriage or moving to a new area – can disrupt established food habits and create opportunities for new rational plans to emerge. These moments of transition are particularly illustrative of our conceptual approach: they demonstrate the complexity of thinking and doing food, as multiple factors – environment, market, economy, health, culture, taste – interweave to shape practices. Beyond highlighting the intricacy of this holistic approach of foodways we call 'food culture,' bifurcations represent special moments of transition, spaces of 'in-between' where creativity often surfaces. They serve as bridges between past habits and future intentions, between 'doing' and 'saying.'

Speaking of ‘sayings,’ these transitions often unfold through narratives. It is about expressions of identity rooted in the discussions, experiences, emotions, and observations of our informants, ultimately articulated in words and gestures. It is often through these bifurcations that participants come to recognise and integrate FQS labels into their practices, shifting from the ‘invisibility’ of these labels to their ‘visibility.’

We must also underline the role of *mimesis*, particularly *Mimesis III* (see Chapter 1), as a pathway to transition – a gateway to the ‘in-between,’ a bridge to transformation and negotiation that play a crucial role in *Cultural Adaptation Work*. Here, *mimesis* becomes a medium through which the transition is imagined, narrated, and enacted, allowing the emergence of change. But now let’s open for further studies in that field, and hope that the second part will offer readers complementary and enriching approaches to further deepen this exploration.

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Part II

Sustainable gaze upon food consumption in households

‘Here comes the sun’



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7 Is there more space for care at the table?

An ethnographic exploration of (un)sustainable family meals in France and Australia

Fairley Le Moal and John Coveney

Introduction

In Western cultures, the organisation of domestic food work in the context of contemporary family life is subject to many normative and ambitious injunctions in terms of health and, more recently, in terms of sustainability. In France, as in many Western countries, consumers are more and more encouraged to shift their everyday food choices to meet norms of sustainable food consumption. This comes on top of the many injunctions targeting families as the focus of commensality and conviviality (Le Moal et al., 2025).

Despite, or even because of, being more and more debated and promoted in the public sphere worldwide, there exist significant differences in national recommendations concerning the sustainability of the food supply. France and Australia are two examples of how the inclusion of sustainability varies in official recommendations (Fischer & Garnett, 2016). In France, principles of sustainability have recently been integrated into official recommendations of the latest National Nutrition Health Program (PNNS 4, 2019–2023). However, even before this, the French Agency for the Environment and Energy (ADEME) promoted recommendations for ‘eco-friendly’ practices, in particular in terms of food consumption. In Australia, previous attempts have been made to include sustainability in the Australian Dietary Guidelines. Nevertheless, so far, Australian dietary recommendations are not promoted based on sustainability, although the guidelines are due to be updated by 2025 or 2026, and there is every likelihood that sustainability will be featured in the newer versions of the guidelines.

In France, the public policies promoting more sustainable food consumption are arguably based on increases in the production and consumption of organic products¹ and a decrease in animal proteins.² However, the purchase of organic products represents only 6% of the overall purchases of French households.³ So, we must look further afield to understand sustainable food practices in France.

The debates about encouraging a sustainable food supply by non-profit organisations, in the media, on social media, and by some governmental organisations usually draw on behavioural sciences, especially the role of individual lifestyle changes to address what essentially are societal issues (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2016; Pilmis, 2018; Saujot et al., 2024). However, as with other messages on lifestyle changes that circulate through public health campaigns, such as dietary recommendations,

a wide gap has repeatedly been observed between norms, recommendations, and practices. The observation of this gap and the legitimacy of these types of policies targeting individuals have been questioned repeatedly in research (Godin & Langlois, 2021; Mehta et al., 2019).

This study reported here approaches the topic of sustainable consumption through the lens of everyday family mealtimes. By doing so, this study allows us to see what place sustainability occupies in households within the bigger picture of domestic food practices and family mealtimes.

This necessary food work of feeding the family has been described as ‘care work’ (DeVault, 1991; Tronto, 2008). In this context, care can be defined as a:

generic activity which includes all the things we are doing to maintain, perpetuate and repair our ‘world’, so that we can live in it as good as possible. It includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all elements that we attempt to connect into a complex network, to sustain life.

(Tronto & Fisher, 1990)

Care, about food work, contains forms of reward. This is through the norms of proper parenting, especially through appropriate mothering and associated gratifications (DeVault, 1991; Tronto & Fisher, 1990). However, sustainable food practices do not always provide such gratification (Dubuisson-Quellier & Gojard, 2016). Indeed, it has been suggested that ‘care’ associated with family norms and correct parenting often acts as a barrier to the establishment of sustainable consumption practice, thus questioning the possibility of addressing ecological and climate crises through households (Godin & Langlois, 2021).

This research reported here aims to deepen our understanding of the articulations of care in relation to food work and (un)sustainable domestic practices. It addresses questions such as: how does sustainability fit with the work of care during family meal practices? Do environmental concerns have a place during family mealtimes? And how do families incorporate care for the environment into care for family? The study looked at how rationales of sustainable food consumption were articulated, or not, with the other imperatives that the parents have to consider in the preparation of everyday family mealtimes.

We investigate the priorities and practices of food sustainability at home between France and Australia. These are two countries where the debates and promotion of sustainable food consumption vary, and provide the opportunity to compare and contrast how the sustainability of the food supply is represented in these two jurisdictions. The results could lead us to rethink and reshape contemporary responsibilities in the current ecological and climate crisis.

Methods

Study design

This study adopts an ethnographic approach, based on observations and interviews, which is one of the most suited approaches to do so (Gojard & Véron, 2018).

Ethnography provides the possibility to witness and document so-called ‘quotidian practices’ (chapter 2); these are habits and performances that often go unnoticed and of which individuals are barely aware because they are immersed in a routine (Lareau, 2021; Lareau & Rao, 2020). The combination of repeated observations of mealtimes and interviews with parents and children allows documenting in depth and from different angles family mealtimes. This depth of the observation permits a low number of cases and families to be observed (Lareau & Rao, 2016).

Sustainable food practices were investigated according to how they are usually publicly promoted in France and Australia (Barbour et al., 2022; Dubuisson-Quellier & Gojard, 2016). We therefore paid attention in the parents’ discourses and practices to discussions of purchasing seasonal or locally produced food, eco-labels (such as organic), food waste and waste prevention practices, and reducing the consumption of meat.

Population and jurisdictions

In the jurisdictions chosen for this study design, a family was not so much defined according to the marital status nor the composition, but rather about the requirement of creating a formal living environment for everybody to grow in, while also taking part in everyday life and supporting each other (Singly, 2017). That is to say, in this article, family is defined more through its practices rather than as an institution, and what a family does and performs is a way of describing it (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 2011; singly, 2017). The recruited household had to be, nevertheless, headed by heterosexual parents. The children’s caregivers could be the biological or adoptive parent, or the stepparent.

Lower, intermediary, and upper middle-class households as well as upper-class families were targeted for recruitment. These criteria were chosen to be able to compare the effect of different socio-economic resources on the management of emotions at mealtimes, while still having a sample of households without significant differences. Working-class households and households living in a situation of poverty were not targeted, nor were households considered to be part of the wealthiest classes of French or Australian society. For this study, social class positions were defined based on professional occupation (Bosc, 2008), household income, and the socio-economic index of the neighbourhood where the family lived. As family food habits are so strongly influenced by work constraints and time stress (Devine et al., 2006; Grignon, 2001; Hochschild, 1997; Jabs et al., 2007), the parents needed to be working professionally a minimum of 80% of a full-time job.

It also appeared necessary to compare family mealtimes in France with commensal practices in an Anglo-Saxon country to investigate how norms and practices around family meals, food work, and sustainability might vary across cultures. The greater urban areas of Lyon (France) and Adelaide (Australia), which had similar socio-demographic characteristics, were chosen as the geographical areas of recruitment.

To be eligible to participate in this study, the households also needed to have children between 4 and 12 years only. This age range was defined according to

our subject of interest: we aimed to investigate how children's food socialisation happened during family mealtimes. With children within this age range, parents make decisions concerning children's food socialisation, but the latter are also old enough to negotiate and influence those decisions (Mathiot, 2014).

Participants

The two groups of participants comprised nine families in Lyon (Table 7.1 and Table 7.2) and five families in Adelaide (Table 7.1 and Table 7.2). There were 11 intact dual-headed households and 3 reconstituted ones. The names of the participants have been changed, and pseudonyms have been used for the sake of confidentiality.

The education of the parents in Lyon ranged from a technical degree to a doctoral degree, and their occupation were varied and included positions in the following sectors: the pharmaceutical industry, engineering (environment, transport, informatics), childcare, education (middle school and tertiary), human resources, sales, secretarial. The education of the parents from Adelaide ranged from a secondary degree (high school) to a doctoral degree. Most of the parents in Adelaide were public servants (education, youth worker, firefighter, housing, informatics, social services), and all of them worked full time or more.

Data collection

The results of the present study come mostly from fieldwork conducted by Fairley Le Moal (FL) for her PhD thesis in Sociology, a white female Caucasian in her thirties of French and Canadian nationalities. The results presented here also come from some data collected and analysed during a follow-up postdoctoral project conducted with Flinders University. The whole fieldwork was conducted between January 2020 and April 2023.

The overall focus of the study was on the domestic food work and the mealtimes, and the participants were told more generally that the fieldworker focused on 'family food practices' and how parents who work professionally manage to 'feed the family'. The recruitment message indicated that the fieldworker FL was a female PhD student in Sociology from the University Lumière Lyon 2 (for the recruitment in Lyon) and Flinders University (for the recruitment in Adelaide). The mealtimes of interest for the participation in this study were those where most of the family members were likely to be present at home, that is to say, the dinnertime. In the context of the lockdown periods during the COVID-19 pandemic, some lunches were of interest as well, as the whole household could be at home all day long.

FL (principal researcher) observed 47 mealtimes, 38 of which were in-person visits, the other being based on video-conferencing tools or were videos recorded by the family (Table 7.3). This amounted to about 90 hours of observations and a median of about 3.5 visits per family. All observations were audio or video recorded, and notes were also taken immediately after the visits. 26 semi-structured

Table 7.1 Family characteristics

<i>Family characteristics</i>			
	<i>Total families n = 14</i>	<i>Families Lyon n = 9</i>	<i>Families Adelaide n = 5</i>
Intact dual headed	11/14	7/9	4/5
Blended dual headed		2/9	1/5
Number of children living at home per household mean (range)	2,2 (1-5)	2,2 (1-5)	2,2 (1-3)
Age of children living at home mean (range)		7,9 (4-12)	5,6 (1-8)
Household income mean (range)		41,500 – 105,00 euros	120,000 – 300,000 Australian dollars
Social class			
- upper class	5/14	4/9	1/5
- upper middle-class	2/14	1/9	1/5
- intermediary middle-class	4/14	3/9	1/5
- lower middle-class	3/14	1/9	2/5
<i>Participants characteristics</i>			
	<i>Total parents n = 28</i>	<i>Total parents Lyon n = 18</i>	<i>Total parents Adelaide n = 10</i>
Mothers	14	9	5
Fathers	14	9	5
Highest level of education of parents			
- Secondary school	2/28	0/18	2/10
- Trade or business degree	2/20	0/18	2/10
- Technical degree	5/28	2/18	3/10
- Bachelor's degree	2/28	0/18	2/10
- Master's degree	14/28	14/18	0/10
- Doctoral degree	3/28	2/18	1/10
Full time paid employment	26/28	16/18	10/10
Part time paid employment	2/28	2/18	0/10
Race			
- Caucasian	27/28	17/18	10/10
- Black	1/28	1/18	0/10
Recent immigration	4/28	4/18	0/5
- Hungary	1/18	1/18	0/5
- Mali	1/18	1/18	0/5
- Romania	2/18	2/18	0/5
	Total children n = 31	Total children Lyon n = 20	Total children Adelaide n = 11
Girls	17/31	11/20	6/11
Boys	14/31	9/20	5/11

This table summarizes the characteristics of the families who took part in the study.

Table 7.2 Family and participants' names, social class, family composition, and age of children

Family surname	Name mother	Name father	Social class		Composition	Age of children
	(recent immigration: country of origin)	(recent immigration: country of origin)				
Lyon						
Bourdon	Marie-Cécile	Benoit				8, 6
Imbert	Magali	Stéphane				8, 5
Ferret	Céline	Jérôme	Upper		Intact	7
Comescu	Irina (Romania)	Laurent				10, 7
Franquet	Nathalie	Lucas	Upper middle class			12, 10
Obecanov	Sophie	Viktor (Hungary)				6
Lebrun	Laëtitia	Pierre	Intermediary middle-class		Blended	11, 10, 9, 8, 6
Nimaga	Ana (Romania)	Issa (Mali)				12, 5
André	Angélique	Pascal	Lower middle-class		Intact	7, 6, 4
Adelaide						
Andrews	Megan	Jack	Upper			7
Bennet	Vanessa	Craig	Upper middle-class			7, 3
Brown	Alison	Luke	Intermediary middle-class		Intact	8, 6
Chapman	Amy	Glen	Lower middle-class			7, 5, 1
Davies	Sally	Adam	Lower middle-class			7, 5, 5

This table provides information about the participants, including their names, social classes, family composition, and children's ages.

Table 7.3 Amount and type of data

	In person visits	Video conf. meals	Family produced videos	Total observation visits = total mealtimes observed	Total hours of observations	Interviews mother (duration: 45- 80 min)	Interviews father (duration: 45- 80 min)	Interview children (duration: 10-40 min)
LYON								
Bourdon	5			5	8,45h	1	1	2/2
Imbert	3	3		6	7h	1	1	2/2
Franquet	3			3	5h	1	1	2/2
Comescu	3	1		4	6,5h	1	1	2/2
Ferret	1			1	4h	1	1	0/1
Obecanov	4	1		5	10,5h	1	1	1/1
Lebrun	7			7	19h	1	1	5/5
Nimaga	2			2	4h	1	1	0/2
André	1		1	2	4h	1	1	0/3
Total Lyon	29	5	1	35	68,45	9	9	14/20
ADELAIDE								
Andrews	3			3	6h15	0	0	0/1
Bennet	3			3	9h	1	1	2/2
Brown	3			3	4h	1	1	2/2
Chapman						1	1	2/3
Davies			3	3	2h	1	1	1/3
Total Adelaide	9		3	12	21h15	4	4	7/11
TOTAL	38	5	4	47	90H	13	13	

This table the amount and the type of data collected

interviews were also conducted with 13 fathers and 13 mothers. Each parent interview lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour and twenty minutes.

Analysis

This is a qualitative study, and the analysis sits between an exclusively inductive approach and a deductive one. A solely inductive approach would have implied going into fieldwork without previous conceptualisation of the research topic nor particularly set research questions, which was not the case here. The materials of this study were analysed by FL according to the grounded theory using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lareau, 2021). All the transcripts were coded. The coding process happened in several stages and was done exclusively by FL. First, some large, thematic categories of codes were created based on the literature review, interview, and observation grid. Most of the codes, however, were created afterwards, when going through each transcript, line by line. Once this first level of coding process ended, the codes were reorganised into new thematic categories according to a focused coding process (Charmaz, 2014). A last level of analysis was done during the writing, as ‘writing is thinking, writing is analysis, writing is indeed a seductive and tangled method of inquiry’ (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 1423).

Findings

Family meal priorities: happily and healthily eating together

The parents of this study endeavoured to reach multiple objectives when it came to feeding their family. The parents observed were mainly concerned about serving healthy menus on a regular basis. Most of the parents in both jurisdictions shared similar notions about what this meant: serving enough vegetables, some but not too many carbohydrates (especially in the upper-class families), some proteins but not too much red meat nor meat in general (for the upper-class families in Lyon), having some dairy products but avoiding desserts and drinks that were heavily sweetened or with too much fat.

It was mostly the mothers who were in charge of finding a healthy menu, and mothers played a central role in how they cared for their families. Food work mainly was experienced by the mothers as burdensome, even though it could also provide feelings of reward. For example, Vanessa, an intermediary middle-class mother from Adelaide, explained how she organised the food work according to a weekly plan ‘to be having healthy food. We’re at least having meat and vegetables for, you know, five nights of the week kind of thing’. She then explains: ‘So, it is time consuming but at least we’re eating healthy food. So [...] it’s kind of satisfying when we’re having healthy, nutritional food’. Magali, an upper-class mother from Lyon, is also the main family member responsible for providing healthy food for her husband and her two eight- and five-year-old daughters. She explains how

her role as a domestic food provider is wrapped up in the demonstration of love for her husband and her children:

There is this relationship that I was taught as a child of ‘you love me so you eat what I prepared’ and ‘I love you so I prepare you something good to eat’, it is also for me a kind of proof of love, to [...] prepare [for her family] good things to eat, healthy and good.

The parents of this study also tried to vary the menus throughout the meals. They aimed at not eating too much of a single ingredient within the frame of a day, a week, and even over several weeks (the latter, for the upper-class households). Family meals menus were thus considered in a much larger context than single dinnertimes. Meals had to be balanced with children’s school lunch, with the dinners throughout the week, but also from one week to another. Lucas Franquet, an intermediary middle-class father from Lyon, was aware of his wife’s concern for having a balanced diet throughout the week:

It’s more her who has the ideas, who will propose things that are a bit diversified. So, it’s more her who will look on the internet. Or we have quite a lot of recipe books, so it’s more her who looks in those to try to diversify, let’s say, or diet. Try to have a balance of things, also.

In addition to this, the parents hoped to please the different family members’ particular tastes and preferences (Le Moal et al., 2023). Nathalie Franquet, an intermediary middle-class mother from Lyon explains that she plans their weekly menus in order to take into account ‘everyone’s preferences, that everyone likes it, [I plan] according to the tastes of the children, who are rather difficult’. The upper-class families orientated the menus more towards their adult tastes, but, even in these households, the parents tried to find healthy menus that their children would like.

This longer-term approach to healthy menus often involved weekly ‘lapses’ in the parents’ principles, usually on Friday evenings or on weekends. As such, most parents were observed and reported trying to have at least one meal a week where all or most of these mealtime rules could be disregarded (Le Moal, in preparation). Céline, an upper-class mother in Lyon explained that, each Friday evening, she and her seven-year-old daughter she would eat on the couch some take-away food, while the father was away at his gym class:

It’s always [the TV dinner on Friday evenings]. I mean, except when we have people over, we don’t do it. But otherwise, yes, it’s a TV dinner with very, very simple dishes to prepare, like the pizza from [the supermarket] or even the ramen, you know, the very chemical things. But Noémie [7 years old] likes that, so we have a TV dinner.

These weekly breaks could also include going out for dinner. Magali, an upper-class mother in Lyon, is mainly responsible for feeding her family and strives to serve healthy and varied food every evening to her husband and two daughters. However, they also find it important to go out regularly: ‘From time to time, we get

lazy, and we go to the Burger King at the corner of the street, because [our daughters] love to play in the dedicated space, which is understandable’.

In addition to all of these normative expectations, parents also aimed to eat together with their children and have an enjoyable moment together (Le Moal, 2024). In Lyon and in Adelaide, norms of conviviality, or of the happy meal, affected the mealtimes, or put otherwise, family members were expected to have a pleasant time at the table, which was associated with the moral imperative of being happy together, as a family. Sophie, an intermediary middle-class mother in Lyon, explains: ‘We try to make sure that we have a good time [...]. The most important is that we be together around a table, that we can be together’. Céline, an upper-class mother of a seven-year-old daughter in Lyon, explains how important it is for her that they eat together with her husband and daughter.

As Celine says:

For me, it’s an enjoyable moment and a moment when we gather. There are a lot of parents who get their children to eat before they eat themselves because it’s true that, then, they will be just the two of them, which I also understand. But then, she is a single child, and I don’t see myself getting her to eat alone. Maybe if there were three of them, we would do that, but now, I would find it a bit sad. In my family, naturally, the meals have always been a very joyful moment, very lively. And I feel like passing this on as well.

In addition to family mealtimes going well, the parents tried to establish good communication at the table (Le Moal, 2024). Commensality was highly valued as a family communication opportunity, although this valorisation varied according to the time and space family members had together during the rest of the day. This association was based on the experience of time scarcity by parents and the lack of time they had with their children. Table talk was a way to reunite the family in a centripetal movement of reciting and sharing during the mealtime activities and experiences that happened to everyone outside the household. This created a sense of cohesion and was a way for parents to control and ‘resignificate’ what has happened in the children’s daily life, at school or elsewhere (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). In recognising and validating the children’s experience outside the household, they created additional family cohesion and spirit. Getting children to talk about their day during mealtimes was also a way to check if children’s lives away from home were healthy and socially balanced. Magali explains how their family mealtimes are important communication and cohesion opportunities for her family. She said: ‘We exchange with [the girls], it’s an exchange moment for all four of us [...]. So, it’s kind of a French culture thing, but we’re really into it. It’s really a sharing moment; it’s not just to feed ourselves: we’re together around a table; it’s an important family moment’.

The attention paid to the health of children through mealtimes was inscribed in a larger consideration of children’s global health, which was reached in particular by good sleep, in terms of scheduling (bedtime hour), duration, and quality (which was associated with a proper meal). For the parents in this study, the imperative of

getting children to bed at a regular hour, and not too late, in Lyon and in Adelaide determined the duration and ending of family mealtimes. When asked if she enjoys family mealtimes, Sally, a lower middle-class mother in Adelaide with three children (twins of five and a seven-year-old), brought up the fundamentally physiological purpose of mealtimes:

Not necessarily [...]. Um, guess it depends on sort of what we're eating as well. But usually, just based on all the drama that goes along with this, it's just, let's just get everyone fed, get us fed, and get into bed as quickly as possible. Especially in winter.

Parents also strived to get children in bed early enough so that they could benefit in the evening from conjugal time or alone time to relax from the day.

Overall, the family mealtimes as they were observed in the different households in Lyon and in Adelaide implied a considerable amount of care, and it was mainly mothers who shouldered this care, food work. In the context of domestic commensality, family care was highly associated with health and wellbeing imperatives and constrained by limited resources (such as time, but also money).

On the other hand, sustainable food practices were not associated with care within the home. This is not to say that no sustainable practices were observed, but there were surprisingly few considering all the families were situated in the middle and upper classes. In addition, when sustainable food consumption practices were observed, they were linked to a significant amount of cooking skills and confidence in these skills. These skills allowed the parents to improvise more and be flexible in their weekly food work, which, as we will argue later, was better suited to sustainable food consumption. Conversely, low confidence in cooking skills was associated with a higher need to anticipate and plan ahead the weekly menus, which, as we will demonstrate below, meant relying more on mainstream food stores such as supermarkets and on standardised food consumption, which is associated with less sustainable food provisioning.

In addition, the family meals observed often happened in a context of high time pressure, often with both parents working outside of home, various extracurricular activities for children, leisure activities for parents and overall conflicting time schedules, making it all the more difficult to achieve these priorities and leading them to disregard other norms such as sustainable consumption (Jabs et al., 2007; Middleton et al., 2020). The health imperatives of appropriate sleep and meals were thus affected by other domestic occupations, such as educational and recreational activities and hygiene routines (children's homework, playtime, bedtime stories, bathing). Family mealtimes were also planned according to family members' public social life engagements (parents' work hours and children's school and childcare schedules).

Providing these healthy, homemade, varied, enjoyable, communicative, and fun mealtimes meant extensive work before the mealtime, which required significant resources and skills. In the section below, we argue that parents' cooking skills and

confidence in their cooking skills affected their engagement in sustainable food practices.

How differences in cooking skills and food work organisation affect sustainable food consumption choices

Significant cooking skills, confidence, and resources facilitate sustainable food consumption

Two types of food provisioning organisation were observed within the 14 households, with differences based on the family's social class position. On the one hand, for some parents, the decision process of what food to buy happened at the food market, or at the food store, depending on the type of (local) produce they would find there. This meant they were able to imagine and plan some or all the meals of the week directly while shopping. For this first type of organisation – deciding on the spot – the parents placed the rationales of buying local and seasonal products quite high in their decision process. They usually shopped at local markets or independent food stores. They argued that they would buy according to availability, which indicated that the availability varied more in these food stores and stands. These two types of food provisioning strategies – deciding on the spot or deciding at home – were associated, in parents, with different levels of confidence in cooking skills. The parents adopting the deciding on the spot strategy talked extensively about food and showed a high confidence in their cooking skills, being able to find out menus quickly, without necessarily looking up recipes for ideas.

Magali's (upper-class mother, Lyon) cooking skills and mental involvement in food work allows her to be able to shop at the local food market on short chain producers' stands – where there is significant variability from one week to another in the type and availability of the produce – and imagine menus there, on the spot. Magali said:

I find it hard not to participate in the groceries. That is to say that sometimes Stéphane [husband] goes shopping, but I prefer that we go together or that I go myself. Because I have my list, but it's always, when I'm going to see the [products available, I think] 'oh that would be nice. There's always, you know like the Avignon festival, I have the "off" that goes round in my head all the time, 'ah well, that would be nice too', and I imagine things and I say well, I'll take that because it will allow me to prepare this kind of thing [...]. I go to the fruit and vegetable stand, I take the vegetables that appeal to me for that week, and the fruit that appeals to me. On top of it, it allows me to buy local produce, because I go to short-circuit producer stands. And for the poultry, it's the same: I have all my boxes [she brings her containers to avoid waste] and so I take what I feel like, and when I don't have any more boxes, I stop.

Being able to imagine menus for the whole family directly on the spot requires significant mental availability and cooking knowledge and skills, especially considering the many imperatives family mealtime menus are subject to, as described above. Similar cooking skills and food work organisation were observed at the Ferret and the Bourdon households in Lyon. They planned their meals according to the fresh products they found at the local stores and markets, such as vegetables, fruit, fish, and meat. In the case of these households, the parents did a large part of their provisioning at street markets and independent butchers, and buying local and seasonal products took up a central part in their rationales for food provisioning. Their weekly menus resulted from the shopping process itself, and the decision about what to have for the week began at the street market and at the butcher. Céline Ferret explains her process: ‘Essentially, when I go to the market [of local, seasonal producers], I think a bit about what I’m going to do and when, and the rest, I manage with what is in the cupboards and I adjust during the week’. David Bourdon, an upper-class father in Lyon, was one of the rare fathers of this study who was mainly in charge of the food work. Every Saturday morning, he would go to the local farmers’ market – sometimes with his children – to buy seasonal and local vegetables. He explains:

For the groceries, we do not plan, except sometimes for the butcher. Last week I made pork cheeks; those are pieces that we do not commonly find, so we need to order. But otherwise, for the fruit and vegetables, we take what is available and we always make do [...]. Generally, we do not have any preconceived idea, we take what is available.

Issa Nimaga, an intermediary middle-class father in Lyon, also possessed excellent cooking skills and cooked a lot at home. He recalled the groceries he bought on the weekend: ‘For the fruit and vegetables, I took a little of what I felt like without thinking too much’. Other families shopped at local farmers’ markets but much more irregularly, on weekend and as more of a leisurely family outing than for doing the weekly groceries. These groceries were anticipated and planned, and usually done in supermarkets, in person, or online.

Time stress, fewer resources, and lower cooking skills hinder sustainable food consumption

On the other hand, many parents planned their meals according to a reverse process; they decided the menus for the whole week in advance, based, for instance, on cookbooks or recycling previous menus. They would then write up the list of food to buy. This meant they arrived at the store with a precise idea of what to buy, which left little room for the unexpected or experimentation. With this type of organisation, where decisions were made at home and a list created, when it came to shopping for food, what was important was that the products were available. If not, they would have to re-imagine and reconfigure the menus, which was not something they wanted or could do in the store. These parents hardly or never

mentioned sustainability in their food practices, except for food waste prevention (which has a moral component, on top of an environmental one).

The parents adopting this strategy showed less confidence in their cooking skills and went more 'by the cookbook'. Lucas Franquet, an upper-class father in Lyon, explains this type of organisation through the food work organisation led by his wife:

About once a week, we make list of menus for the entire week. After that, we deduce the list of groceries, and then we go shopping. We set up this organisation with my wife a few years ago, so now it's pretty rigorous. We like to be quite rigorous, pretty organised.

The most common reason reported by parents who undertook 'deciding at home' was lack of time in the evening to shop, prepare food, and serve dinner at an appropriate hour. The time stress parents were under resulted from competing imperatives: parents' professional work, parents and children's leisure activities, children's homework, getting the meal ready in time to eat at an appropriate hour, children's hygiene routines, and getting them in bed at a proper hour.

The 'deciding at home' strategies were commonly based on ordering groceries online. At the Bennet household in Adelaide, Vanessa took care of choosing which meals to plan for the upcoming seven dinners, but also consulted the other family members to make sure they agreed with her choices. Vanessa said:

I do my meal planning once a week. It's typically, sort of like come Friday, I would start to think about what we're going to eat from Sunday through to the following Saturday. At the bigger supermarket, I do an online food order. So, I usually submit my food order on a Saturday so that I can pick it up from the food store on Sunday.

At the Lebrun household in Lyon (intermediary middle class), they did not plan their menus for the whole week, but their groceries were also based on ordering food online at supermarkets every two weeks for approximately euros, which Pierre occasionally complemented with a few fresh products bought in local stores.

Discussion

Our results allow us to think differently about the reasons why sustainable food consumption is adopted. They show that the priorities of family meals are mainly based on the health and well-being of family members, as well as on social priorities like creating family cohesion. Therefore, providing nutritionally balanced meals that are varied over the days but also liked by all, eating together enjoyably, and allowing space for family communication overshadowed sustainable food consumption because the latter was neither as prioritised as a social norm within the household nor as rewarding for the food provider. Not only are everyday family meals subject to many imperatives, but feeding the family on a daily basis, in the household observed, happened under important time stress conditions – even more

so for the households who could not afford domestic help. This left little room for more priorities at the table.

Our results suggest that engaging in sustainable food consumption requires additional time. In France and Australia, engaging in sustainable food consumption practices often implies being able to shop in other locations than mainstream supermarkets, where the sustainable choices are more limited, such as short chain fresh and seasonal products, and products with limited packaging (such as bulk food options). Protein alternatives are also not always available in large choices in mainstream supermarkets. Consequently, the parents of this study who adopted sustainable food consumption practices had to go to diverse food locations – such as local farmers' markets and specialty stores – to access sustainable food choices. This was more time-consuming and required additional availability.

Because of a lack of time, the skills, and the mental availability to quickly find out the menus and cook a healthy, varied, and likeable meal at the end of the day, after work, many parents, and mostly the mothers, planned their mealtimes in advance, during the weekend. Meal planning is also mostly described in favourable terms in the scientific literature. Meal planning skills have been associated with a high chance of home-prepared meals (Horning et al., 2017). Low meal planning, on the contrary, has been linked with the consumption of more fast food (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2014). This anticipation of the weekly menus was the first step in the food work process and was usually followed by doing the groceries. Once they had spent time finding out recipes, deciding on the menus, and drafting up the shopping list, these parents were highly reliant on the products being available. Yet, doing one's groceries in alternative locations that are represented to offer more sustainable food, such as short circuit food markets, or smaller independent stores, often leads to greater variability in the types and quantity of products available. The parents who organised their weekly foodwork by first deciding on the menus for the whole week were thus more likely, our study suggests, to shop in mainstream supermarkets or do their groceries online.

Additionally, some of the sustainable food practices observed – prioritising buying local and seasonal products, for instance – were favoured thanks to some of the parents' developed cooking skills. The parents who adopted the most sustainable food consumption practices – buying only or mostly local, seasonal fruit and vegetables, engaging in food waste reduction practices, for example – decided their menus directly at the food stand. Doing so required a significant amount of cooking skills and knowledge as well as confidence in them, improvisation abilities, but also mental availability.

Focusing only or mostly on changing individual or household habits to fight climate change is neither enough nor necessarily based on an accurate understanding of what a society is and how it functions. Individuals and households evolve in a system that shapes their practices and often prevents them from consuming as they would hope to. As Godin and Langlois argue, 'trying to adopt a sustainable lifestyle in a non-sustainable society tends to involve a lot of work, time, and energy'. Do we want to make the efforts for sustainable food consumption more rewarding, individually speaking, thus increasing the care workload within households and for

mothers, or does the care for environmental issues need to be addressed more collectively? Based on the results of our study, we suggest that there is limited room for extra care carried by mothers in the process of feeding the family. However, facilitating sustainable consumption on a more structural and societal scale, making buying and cooking more sustainable food less time-consuming, expensive, and divulging knowledge and skills on how to do so, would facilitate the task for families. After all, as Tronto argued, care has a collective dimension, and caring for the environment should also be done collectively rather than placing the burden mostly on individuals and households and, again, on mothers (Tronto, 2008).

Notes

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8 Eating to sustain

Challenges for local food diversity: The case of the Ringerike potato, a Norwegian PGI

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Introduction

The phrase ‘eating to sustain’ captures the current need to diversify our diets to contribute to the preservation and use of food varieties that would otherwise disappear. Globalisation has seemingly led to greater diversity of food and given Western consumers a taste for different cuisines from all over the world. On one level, it appears that we have become more culturally diverse in food preferences; however, on another level, we submit to a standardised diet which is threatening our biocultural diversity, as displayed by a decline in diversity of agricultural systems worldwide and an erosion of the cultural knowledge that underpins these systems.

It is estimated that, on a global scale, crop varieties have declined by 75% since the middle of the 20th century and that about 60% of the calorie and protein intake from plants stems from only three crops: maize, rice, and wheat. There is a fear that these global trends in food production and consumption threaten the agrobiodiversity and biocultural diversity, particularly at the local scale (FAO, 2019).¹

In his book, *Eating to Extinction*, journalist Dan Saladino (2021) highlights the many endangered foods worldwide and the necessity to save them. He emphasises that this is not just a question of ensuring cultural diversity, but that safeguarding ancient and rare foods is about making us better equipped for future food crises and the ongoing global climate and nature crisis. Also, in keeping with the slogan, ‘If you want to preserve an endangered potato variety, eat it!’, gene banks and voluntary organisations, such as Slow Food, point out that it is through active use that the ancient food varieties are best preserved (Asdal, 2017).²

With the help of a conventional theoretical approach, we will discuss in this chapter the conditions for sustaining the use of heritage food and products included in Geographical Indication (GI) food quality schemes. The study on which this chapter is based was conducted within the research project FOODIVERSE³ in which the main hypothesis assumed that a diverse food system is more sustainable, strengthening resilience and enhancing socio-economic and environmental benefits along the food chain. However, as discussed above, food diversity is under constant pressure, and, by using the Norwegian PGI labelled Ringerike potato as

an example, we will take a closer look at why it is so difficult to preserve food diversity despite political will, measures to protect endangered foods, and farmers' efforts to strengthen production and consumption of local, traditional, heritage foods.

We have chosen the potato as our object for studying food diversity because of its importance as a staple food and thus its essential role for food security. It is eaten most places in the world and has been highly adaptable to local conditions. In Norway, some local varieties are still important, but many varieties are in danger of disappearing because potato consumption in general is in decline, and also because of an ongoing standardisation in potato production. It is argued that in Norway, the consumption will continue to decrease as older potato-eating cohorts are replaced with younger cohorts who eat potatoes less frequently, posing a triple challenge to food security, nutritional health, and the environment (Gustavsen, 2021).

On the political and regulatory level, there is a lack of measures directly aimed at ensuring a stable production, sale and consumption of traditional and heritage crops and breeds. Among the few measures that exist on a European level are the Geographical Indications for food and drinks (GIs) that are implemented to safeguard and develop locally adapted and traditionally used varieties and breeds. The aim of these labelling schemes is, among other things, to contribute to local food products becoming more visible in the market and to be a quality guarantee for consumers. A perception underpinning the development of food quality labelled products is that they 'probably [will] be embedded in long-standing cultures of consumption in which the qualities of the product accord with local notions of taste' (Morgan et al., 2006). However, as discussed earlier in the book, the familiarity and use of these labelling schemes vary greatly between households, countries, and different types of products. It is not given that this type of labelling scheme receives the increased attention from consumers that politicians aim for. There are many reasons for this, partly rooted in social and cultural factors (Amilien, 2011; Amilien et al., 2022). Not least, there are a number of challenges related to the promotion and marketing of such quality-labelled products related to how actors in the food value chain evaluate and qualify food products, especially those foods that do not adhere to given 'industrial' or 'market' standards.

Consequently, we examine which quality conventions different actors – the farmer, retailer, labelling body, and consumer – emphasize regarding the production and consumption of the Ringerike potato. In the following, we will briefly outline how we have applied the conventional theoretical approach to our analysis. We will then describe the method and data before a short presentation of the Ringerike potato. Then follows an analysis of the development of the Ringerike potato from the point of view of the producer, the retailer, the GI labelling body, and the consumer. The analysis points not only to challenges, but also to alternatives that can strengthen and sustainably further develop sales and consumption of the Ringerike potato.

Analytical approach

This analysis aims to investigate common perceptions as well as contradictions between different actors in the food system and highlight the mechanisms that both promote and inhibit the production and consumption of endangered varieties crucial for the local economy and regional cultural heritage, such as the Ringerike potato. Our approach is inspired by the theoretical framework established in the S2F project as well as by Ponte 2016, who draws on the works on conventions theory of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, 1999). The convention theory was developed to build a framework to analyse how people justify their actions and arguments in moments of dispute (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1999). It has been applied in agri-food studies, typically in the form of economic analyses of quality conventions in food production and marketing as well as the development of alternative food networks (Murdoch & Miele, 1999; Ponte, 2016).

Following Thevenot et al. (2000, p.237): ‘Justifications can involve positive “arguments,” claims, or position statements, but might also be critical “denunciations” of opposing views in the dynamics of public disputes’. The justification of arguments and actions typically draws on a set of different ‘orders of worth’ or ‘worlds’ that are seen as legitimate. As presented in chapters 3 and 6, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006, 1999) identified six specific worlds which have later been supplemented, among others, with a ‘green world’. Following is a brief reminding description of the seven worlds, their core values, and central questions belonging to each of the worlds, as applied to food studies among others by Ponte (2016) and Andersen (2011).

The *market world* is centred around competition and profit, and price is the primary measure of product quality. The main questions underpinning the test of ‘quality’ of a product are: ‘Is it economic’ or ‘Is it worth a premium price?’.

The *industrial world* evokes principles of efficiency and standardisation with a focus on technological solutions and with productivity as a measurable goal. Quality is understood in terms of efficiency, functionality (standardisation), and scalability (mass markets) (Ponte, 2016; Torjusen & Vittersø, 2023). Thus, the important question underpinning ‘quality’ tests here is whether the product can increase the volume of production to meet market demand. ‘Is it scalable?’.

The *domestic world* is centred around familiarity, and the central values are trust, loyalty, care provision, and tradition. According to Ponte (2016), the questions underpinning the test of product quality are: ‘Does it follow tradition?’, ‘Can it be trusted?’.

The *green world* is related to safeguarding a healthy environment, and a product quality test question might be: ‘How does it affect the environment?’.

The *civic world* is associated with virtues such as solidarity, justice, and collective representation. Central questions will be: ‘What is the impact on society (public health, employment)?’, ‘What is a fair price for the product?’.

The *inspired world* is characterised by conventions connected to creativity and innovation. One motivating force may, for instance, be the aesthetic pleasures of food (Andersen, 2011; Ponte, 2016). The quality test centres around the

uniqueness of the product: ‘Is it original?’, ‘Is it aesthetic or catered to sublime taste experiences?’.

In the *opinion/renown world*, visibility and reputation are central driving forces; thus, branding and public relations (PR) are important activities for economic actors. Here, the quality test depends on consumers’ approval of such products: ‘Do consumers endorse it?’. See Table 8.1 for an overview of the above.

In our study, we have focused more specifically on two sets of conventions, often emphasised more generally in this type of food chain analysis within agri-food studies (see Morgan et al., 2006):

- Conventions adhering to standardisation
- Conventions adhering to specialisation based on local and personalised relations

In short, standardised production processes can be combined with generic marketing in mass markets (*industrial world*) or differentiation in niche markets (*market world*). Specialised production processes, small scale, and often handicraft products are aimed at niche markets and usually based on short supply food chains (*domestic [interpersonal] world*) (see e.g. Morgan et al., 2006; Stræte & Marsden, 2006; Storper & Salais, 1997; Murdoch & Miele, 1999; Vittersø et al., 2005). These worlds co-exist, for instance, in supermarkets where local specialties may be offered in line with standardised, generic products.

Table 8.1 Overview of worlds of justifications. Own adaptation from Fonte 2016.

<i>World</i>	<i>Core values</i>	<i>Central question to be asked</i>
Market	Centred around competition and profit. Price is the main measure of product quality.	Is it economic? Is it worth a premium price?
Industrial	Efficiency and standardisation. Technological innovations and productivity as measurable goals.	Is it efficient/scalable?
Domestic	Centred around familiarity, and central values are trust, loyalty, care provision, and tradition.	Does it follow tradition? Can it be trusted?
Green	Safeguarding a healthy environment.	How does it affect the environment?
Civic	Associated with virtues such as solidarity, justice, and collective representation.	What is the impact on society? What is a fair price for the product?
Inspired	Characterised by conventions connected to creativity and innovation.	Is it original? Is it aesthetic or catered to sublime taste experiences?
Opinion	Visibility and reputation through branding and public relations (PR)	Do consumers endorse it?

In the analysis, we will look at how different conventions affect the production, distribution, marketing, and consumption of the Ringerike potato, seen from the perspective of the producer (farmer), the retail chain, the food labelling body, and consumers. We hypothesise that conflicting conventions not only between the different actors but also internally within the same type of actor will have adverse effects. In contrast, shared conventions among the actors will have positive effects and spur positive developments of the Ringerike potato (see e.g. Andreola et al., 2021, Torjusen & Vittersø, 2023).

Data and method

The analyses are based on datasets retrieved from different parts of the FOOdIVERSE project, which was conducted in Germany, Italy, Norway, Poland, and the UK. One task contained an investigation of socio-economic configurations of three different food provisioning systems (supermarkets, alternative food networks, and public procurement) in the five participating countries, and how they impact and are impacted by local agrobiodiversity and bio-cultural diversity. In this chapter, we use data from Norway, and the investigation was based on in-depth interviews with key actors in the value chains. The analyses are based on interviews with one farmer producing the Ringerike potato. In addition, we interviewed one person working with the promotion of local food within the NorgesGruppen retail chain that makes use of their special promotion scheme ‘Matskatter’ (‘Food Treasures’), which also includes the Ringerike potato. Finally, we interviewed the director of Stiftelsen Norsk Mat (Norwegian food foundation), responsible for food quality schemes in Norway, including the GI certification system. The interviews were carried out from January to March 2023, with a follow-up interview with the Ringerike potato producer in January 2024.

Data from consumers were retrieved from two focus groups conducted in the region of Norway where the Ringerike potatoes are produced; one with eight members of a community- supported agriculture cooperative (CSA) and one with five citizens from the same geographical area who were not members of the CSA or other local food schemes (see Table 8.2).

Table 8.2 Overview of data from the FOOdIVERSE project

<i>Data</i>	<i>Participants</i>
In-depth interviews with key informants	Farmer of ‘Ringerike potatoes’ Retail sector: local food developer Public food schemes: Director of ‘Norwegian food foundation’
Focus groups	CSA members, eight participants (P1.1–1.8) Citizens in the same geographical area who were not members of local food networks, five participants (P2.1–2.5)

The aim was to get an understanding of people's food practices, their perceptions of food, and how this relates to agrobiodiversity and bio-cultural diversity. The participants were particularly asked about their associations and use of different varieties and types of potato products that were displayed on a table (see Figure 8.1):

We wanted their immediate thoughts about the products before we went deeper into if and how they used the different products.

Most of the focus group participants differed from the 'average' consumer in the sense that they had great interest in and knowledge of both growing and use (storage, preparing, and cooking) of potatoes. In the CSA group, three out of eight participants were farmers themselves, and the rest were regular members of the CSA who also participated in growing potatoes. In the second focus group, containing five participants, the knowledge and experience with growing were more diverse; however, all had strong opinions about the quality and use of potatoes for different purposes and occasions.

In addition, we make use of analysis of policy documents, annual reports, and marketing leaflets (retail chains), websites (producers, retailers, labelling bodies), documents, and research literature related to the regulations of protected geographical indications (PGIs and specifically the Ringerike potato). We also conducted a market audit in two different supermarkets in the Ringerike and Hadeland areas. The market audit included several food products such as vegetables, fruits, legumes, bread, and meat, but with a special focus on potatoes and apples. Potatoes and apples were particularly of interest because these are foods that are grown and used in all the participating countries of the FOODIVERSE project, thus suitable



Figure 8.1 Different potato products displayed to spur focus group discussions

Source: FOODIVERSE material – curated by researcher

for comparisons across national and cultural contexts. In this chapter, we draw especially on how potatoes were displayed in the shop and what kind of information was visible to the customers. We investigated the information on the shelves and packaging of the products. Pictures of the products are included in the description and the analysis of the Ringerike potato.

The Ringerike potato

From old sources, it is stated that the Ringerike potato was regarded as the aristocrat among Norwegian potato varieties, possibly because of the special quality, area of use, and consequent (high) price for the potato. It was first imported to the capital Oslo (probably from Scotland) in the mid-1800s and was since 1867 cultivated on several farms in Ringerike, a region just north of the capital Oslo, and given the variety name 'Aabel' after the farmer Jens Aabel.⁴ It was mainly sold in Oslo and Ringerike, and, due to its place of production, customers referred to it as 'Ringerike potato', which later became the name of the variety (Strøm, 2024).⁵ Until the 1930s, the Ringerike potato was sold directly to customers in the Oslo and Ringerike area, but, in 1935, the farmers began to organise themselves into a joint sales organisation, and sales boomed until World War II.

Newer potato varieties on the market contributed to the Ringerike potato becoming less widespread in the post-war period, but, in the 1990s, a new commercialisation and organisation of the cultivation of Ringerike potato started. This is seen in conjunction with changed eating habits and increased attention to traditional Norwegian food.⁶ Today, the Ringerike potato is associated with Christmas celebrations and used together with traditional dishes such as 'rakfisk',⁷ 'lutefisk',⁸ and 'pinnekjøtt'.⁹

The producers' association behind the PGI originally consisted of six farms in Hole and Ringerike municipalities. In the 1990s, they organized themselves into a potato grower organization with the aim of promoting the cultivation of the Ringerike potato. As part of promoting the interests of growers, the association began to profile itself at food festivals in the regions around Ringerike, including the Rakfisk festival at Fagernes in the mountain region of Valdres.¹⁰

Together with the Gulløye (Golden eye) variety, the Ringerike potato is one of the few old land race potatoes still grown and sold on a commercial scale in Norway. It was one of the first Norwegian food products to receive a geographically protected designation in 2007 (Hegnes, 2013). The aim of registering Ringerike potato as a protected designation was to gain greater attention in the market, but also to stay stronger as a common association that could protect against competition and dilution of the term Ringerike potato ('Ringerike potato from Ringerike'). However, for several reasons that we will come back to, the PGI labelling has not been sufficient to ensure the long-term preservation and development of this potato variety (see Hegnes, 2024). Since 2007, the sale of the Ringerike potato has declined.

Results

The producer

Today, there is only one farmer left in the association producing Ringerike potatoes for commercial sales. They run the same farm as Jens Aabel, who was one of the first to introduce the variety in Ringerike in the late 19th century. In addition to potatoes, the farm also grows grain for in-house liquor production, as well as seeds and grass. The farmer is devoted to environmentally sustainable production where biodiversity and soil health are integrated parts of the farming practice. They are also planning a major crop rotation that includes fava beans for feed.

Even though they have a range of different products on the farm and target specific markets and groups of consumers, they believe it is necessary to produce a certain volume – ideally the highest possible – and to make use of both long and short supply chains to achieve stable and secure earnings. In the following, we will refer to written sources as well as how the producer spoke of various quality properties of the Ringerike potato and how it impacted virtually every link in the value chain: cultivation, processing, packaging, distribution, sales, and consumption.

Local knowledge based on long experience in growing the potato helps to ensure the special quality of the Ringerike potato. This variety is demanding to cultivate, thrives best in a special type of soil (*calcareous*), and must be treated specifically to ensure the best possible quality.¹¹

The Ringerike potato is not very suitable for volume production. It has lower yields compared to other volume varieties, and this was one of the reasons why many farmers stopped growing the potato for commercial sale. The Ringerike potato is small compared to many other varieties and has an uneven shape. Due to its somewhat angular shape, the potato is unsuitable for sorting by large industrial machines, which tend to damage it and cause blue bump marks.¹²

It is said that despite being smaller than other potatoes, farmers get a higher price for the Ringerike potato because it has ‘good cooking properties’ and people ‘like it’. According to the PGI regulation, it must have a high content of solids (dry matter).¹³ The farmer additionally emphasised the very special food qualities:

It’s the taste and the food properties of the potato itself. Plus, it’s Norway’s second oldest food product that hasn’t been ‘tampered with’. So [...] it’s a unique Norwegian product, to the extent that you can call a potato a Norwegian product. But we believe that it is, it has very special qualities concerning cooking, then. So, it’s a traditional potato with a long history in Eastern Norway, especially.

(Producer, Ringerike potato)

On the packaging, different types of information are given. It tells the history of the potato and for which types of dishes and occasions it can be used, as well as providing new recipes on how to use the potato. The information reflects a duality between tradition and innovation. On the packaging, the culinary traditions are underlined:

Ringerike's potato is often called the social potato. It thrives well with pinnekjøtt, rakfisk, lutefisk and other quality foods that is eaten in good company. It's not without reason that the potato comes with natural dimples [see Figure 8.2].

On the other hand, the producers want to promote new ways of using the potato. Two recipes for salt-baked potatoes and spicy Ringerike potatoes are therefore printed on the back of the packaging. This is probably to highlight diverse uses of the potato other than the traditional ones. One aim was said to attract new customers (see Figure 8.3).

The farmer claimed that the PGI-label (see the label on the picture on the top of the packaging: Figure 8.2) has had little impact on the marketing of the Ringerike potato in the retail chains. According to the farmer, the development in the grocery market has not been favourable for the Ringerike potato. One factor that may have affected sales is the focus on price in the food market and, in particular, regularly updated comparisons of prices of a so-called 'food basket' between the major



Figure 8.2 Front of packaging

Source: FOODiVERSE material – curated by researcher

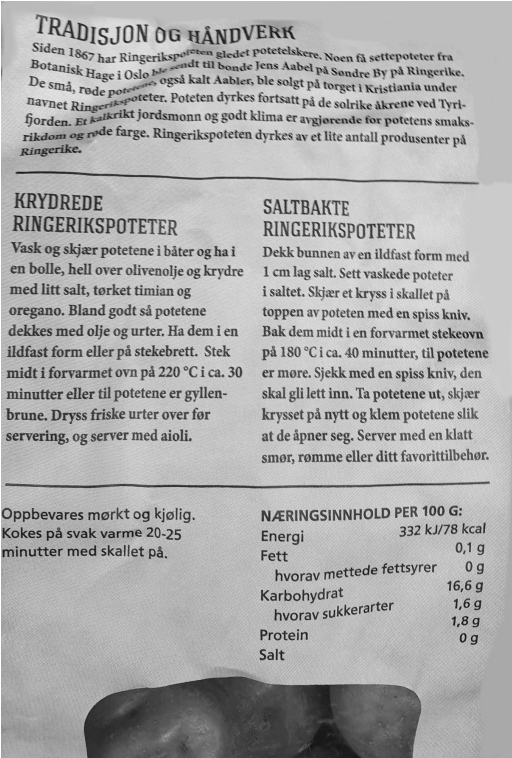


Figure 8.3 Back of packaging
Source: FOODiVERSE material – curated by researcher

retail chains. It is the newspaper media that publishes these comparisons that often lead to adjustments of prices on products that are included in the basket. Before Christmas 2017, *Verdens Gang* (VG), the largest Norwegian tabloid newspaper, included almond potatoes in the shopping basket for the first time, and this may have resulted in a lowering of the price of almond potatoes in general. According to the producer, this may have outcompeted the Ringerike potato in the market. From 2017 to 2018, he reported having lost 70% of the sales volume:

Around 60% of our sales happen during Christmas because Ringerike potato is a traditional food that you must have at the Christmas table [...] It is no point in selling Ringerike potatoes at 37 NOK per kilo when you can get almond potatoes for 4 NOK per kilo. This is dramatic and goes beyond the diversity issue.

(Ringerike potato producer)

Retailer

The retail sector in Norway is highly concentrated, and three major retail chains, NorgesGruppen, COOP, and REMA 1000, account for 96% of the Norwegian grocery market. NorgesGruppen is the largest, with a market share in 2019 of 43% (Alfnes et al., 2019). The retail chain has several store concepts that are directed towards different types of markets and customers. The largest one in terms of market share is Kiwi, a budget store concept. In our study, we have chosen to focus on the Meny ['Menu'] full-range supermarket chain with the most pronounced strategy for the development and marketing of local food products. The stated goal is that 10% of the sales should be from local food products. Presently, it has reached 7%.¹⁴ To reach the goal, NorgesGruppen has launched the Matskatter promotion brand, which is central to the retail chain's diversification strategy. The strategy is a way for Meny to offer a wider range of Norwegian food specialties that are less available in budget stores, and it is also said to attract customers from other competing retail chains.

Matskatter includes 450 local food producers from all over Norway.¹⁵ According to the local food developer, the scheme gives an opportunity for small-scale producers to get a wider distribution, if they live up to the rules, requirements, and standards set by the authorities and the retail chain. According to the Meny home page, a 'Food Treasure' is defined by:

the unique quality of that particular product, in combination with a clear local identity and a good history [...] It often comes from a small manufacturer, and sometimes from a large one. A Food Treasure can be an excellent cheese, a lightly salted ham, a delicious jam, delicate clipfish, a clean-cut salmon loin, good and meaty sausages, farm-pressed apple, or a tasty potato.¹⁶

There are several publicly supported food quality labels on the Norwegian market. Besides the three different Geographical Indication labels, we find a food specialty label (Spesialitet) and an organic label (Ø-label). In addition, there is a more generic label 'Nyt Norge' ['Enjoy Norway'] which indicates Norwegian provenance of the food product. However, these quality labels are not necessarily included in the differentiation strategy of NorgesGruppen. The interviewee from NorgesGruppen explained:

Then there are the ones with the Specialty label, which may be found in all Norwegian stores, not only ours. The Food Treasures scheme has been established to have a communicative concept that encompasses local foods from the whole of Norway, and market them together to be more visible, and increase the chance of the products being chosen by the customer.

(Local food developer, retail chain)

The interviewee from NorgesGruppen expressed the view that, for producers aiming at selling specialties through their retail stores, the wise thing to do is to

collaborate closely with the local merchant when it comes to selection and marketing. The interviewee elaborated on how to target different segments of consumers:

So, I think you must have rational production for those customers who value price the most, and then you have to work much more with diversity and unique qualities, for those who demand unique qualities out of gastronomic or cultural perspectives, or idealistic perspectives.

(Local food developer, retail chain)

The informant went on to explain that they apply a ‘rifle strategy’ when helping producers with marketing of their products within the retail chain. The rifle strategy involves targeting a specific audience effectively through clearly defined promotional strategies. The focus of the marketing strategy is narrowed to a specific demographic, and it is said to be beneficial for small enterprises that do not have available funds for promotional campaigns. Selection of target groups is deliberately performed following consumers’ income, residential area, and their previous consumption habits.

The certification body

Food quality labels in Norway are managed by a single independent body called Stiftelsen Norsk Mat (Norwegian food foundation), whose aim is to contribute to increased diversity, quality, and value creation in Norwegian food production. In addition to the three GI labels, the foundation manages the other three quality labels as mentioned above.¹⁷ Similar to GIs, such schemes provide greater transparency for consumers, reliable quality information, and have a certified guarantee of the true origin of the product. However, these labels do not have the same weight within the organisation. The Nyt Norge label, as the director mentioned, is the flagship of the organisation, even though the label does not distinguish itself from other standardised products. Notably, whereas GIs provide information on whether raw materials and/or production, or at least one step of production, come from a specific geographic area, Nyt Norge only certifies that the raw ingredients are of Norwegian origin and that the product is processed in Norway without indicating a specific geographic area.

The Nyt Norge label, the biggest flagship, is a mark of origin that just says that this food is Norwegian [...] We play with it in terms of communication and marketing, but we never say it’s a mark of quality. We say it’s a mark of origin.

(Director, Stiftelsen Norsk Mat)

The director points out several factors that may hamper the success of GIs in Norway:

We have 32 products in Norway that have this label, but they are completely unknown in Norway. That is because, I think, there are very few producers

in Norway that make these products. They are very small scale, and their produce is generally seasonal. This is very different from the Italian Parma ham where you have 250 producers making this type of ham in the Parma province for generations.

(Director, Stiftelsen Norsk Mat)

Following the director, there is a need to rethink what types or categories of products may be included in the GI schemes while pointing to Sweden as an interesting example:

If you see Sweden, they have assigned PGIs and PDOs to a range of products that go from Polka [candy stick] to Kalix [caviar]. Although Norway has a larger number of products with a protected designated label than Sweden, these food categories are still too small and niche in order to be known and appreciated by consumers.

(Director, Stiftelsen Norsk Mat)

The director goes on to say that strengthening knowledge concerning the enhanced qualities that GI-certified products embody can contribute to an increase in consumers' interest in those products. However, the director mentioned that the private label Food Treasures developed by NorgesGruppen competes with the GI labels and the other quality food labels developed by Stiftelsen Norsk Mat, with the consequence of misleading consumers about the different qualities that these food labelling systems certify and guarantee:

The reason why the supermarket chain promotes this food label is to create more value for themselves. Whereas, we are neutral when we promote local and specialty food, and that is our strength [as an organisation] [...] I am not happy that we got copied so bluntly. [However], one cannot tell what the difference is between the food products that hold our specialty labels and those that hold the NorgesGruppen label. So, I am not happy about that.

(Director, Stiftelsen Norsk Mat)

According to the director, the products with GI labels face several challenges connected to less promotion and direct competition from the retail chains' own private labels.

Focus group participants

The participants were asked about their associations and use of potato products. Different varieties and potato products were displayed on a table to spur the discussion (see Figure 8.1 in the Data and methods section above). Country of origin was one aspect that the participants looked for, and the Norwegian origin of potatoes was preferred. On principle, one of the participants did not buy potatoes from Israel, while other participants refrained from buying imported potatoes because of unnecessary transportation of food products that could also be grown in Norway.

The participants from the CSA were content that they grow their own potatoes, thus avoiding potatoes that are washed, transported over long distances, and packed in unnecessary (plastic) packaging. They thought that these were factors that contribute to reducing the quality of potatoes.

For the focus group participants, the selection of potato variety was often seen in conjunction with the type of dish or occasion it should be used for. Floury potatoes were highlighted as best suited for making mashed potatoes. Not least, almond potato was preferred by some participants, both because of its consistency (floured) and great taste.

Most of the participants recognised the Ringerike potato even if they did not notice the origin label (PGI) on the packaging. They acknowledged and appreciated that it was a local variety that was grown in the district. Some bought the Ringerike potato directly from a farmer they knew, and some even grew them themselves.

Almond potato and Ringerike potato are often compared and highlighted because of their good taste and their link to local culinary traditions. No one mentioned that they used Ringerike potato on a daily basis, on the contrary, it was used for special occasions and very special dishes related to Christmas celebrations:

We buy them for Christmas. We know one of those who grows them [...] I do think that they are particularly tasty, and I think that most people who live in Ringerike want them for the 'rakfisk' dish. [...]

(P1.6)

But again, it is a little like – because of the shape – I think, when we make 'pinnekjøtt' [traditionnal salt-cured and dried lamb ribs] then I find that these are the best ones – to lay underneath, when we steam 'pinnekjøtt' – and it is also nice that it is local – I buy it a little bit because of that too. But mostly perhaps because the taste is what it is, really. But you buy it perhaps mostly because it is someone we know?

(P1.8)

No, I buy them because I think they are really good potatoes.

(P1.6)

Not everyone was familiar with the Ringerike potato - one participant stated a preference not to eat Ringerike potato and even less so than the almond potato, which is often used for similar dishes as the Ringerike potato.

I am not sure if I know what it tastes like?

(P2.4)

The Ringerike potato is delicious, and if you want to serve rakfisk, it's automatically included. It's either Ringerike potato or almond potato.

(P2.3)

Yes, but for me it's the almond potato. It's straightforward to deal with almond potatoes.

(P.2.4)

That's Christmas Eve, the almond potato, for me.

(P2.1)

Many of the participants compared the Ringerike potato to the almond potato. They were conceived of in quite similar ways as very tasty and as a natural accessory to traditional dishes such as rakfisk. The almond potato was considered more convenient and available. The Ringerike potato could therefore quite easily be replaced with an almond potato. One of the participants really struggled to find the Ringerike potato in the store:

I have not seen the Ringerike potatoes in the stores since I moved here. I have only heard about them. But I have thought that they must be possible to get hold of? And they are [nodding to the potatoes at the table]! I just don't know where!

(P1.1)

As shown earlier in this chapter, campaigns for almond potato are increasingly run, especially before Christmas, and price plays an important role for many:

Interviewer: Do any of you use the Ringerike potato?

Normally if it's on sale [...] We are quite price conscious. (P2.1)

Convenience was as important as price for many when it came to choosing a potato variety in the store. However, visual appearance, consistency, and other physical properties of the potato were also important, and one of the participants pointed out the uneven shape as a real disadvantage when preparing and cooking the Ringerike potato:

I think that when there are such knobs on them and such, then I become a bit like 'ugh, a lot of hassle to get rid of'.

(P2.4)

However, one of the other participants came up with alternative solutions on how to prepare the Ringerike potato in a simpler way:

It doesn't really matter if you're going to cut them into boats. Because then you can cut away the knobs.

(P2.1)

Yes, no, but if I fry. I make hazel baked potatoes. So, then I have to peel them, or at least get them washed properly.

(P2.4)

A third participant pointed out that the ‘correct’ way to prepare and eat the Ringerike potato was to keep the peel on when both cooking and eating it:

if you are an experienced rakfisk lover, then your potatoes should be small, and you certainly do not peel them. You wash them with a brush. Once I had dinner with some posh people who didn’t peel the Ringerike potatoes, no. And they taste better with the skin on. On top of that, it’s healthier, because that’s where the vitamins are located.

.(P2.3)

Despite a visible pride in the local Ringerike potato as a really tasty and high quality potato, which for some was a must-have for traditional Christmas dishes such as rakfisk, lutefisk, or pinnekjøtt, the focus group discussions also reflected the many obstacles related to practical issues with the size and shape, availability in food stores, and higher price compared to other potato varieties, not least the almond potato.

Discussion

With the help of the conventional theoretical framework, we have analysed how the Ringerike potato is perceived and handled by four different types of actors in the food system: farmers, retailers, the labelling body, and consumers. The analysis shows how the actors attach different modes of justifications or quality conventions to the Ringerike potato, including the extent to which these conventions are shared or create tensions between the different actors.

In spite of positive regulatory (PGI labelling) and marketing (Food Treasure) measures, the Ringerike potato struggles with commercial success and reaching a wider audience of consumers. Its production volume (sales volume in retail) has steadily decreased, and so have the number of farmers that produce the potato for commercial sale.

From the analysis, this development may be adhered to specific features of the Ringerike potato, but these are best understood in more general socio-economic and socio-cultural terms. Interestingly, the farmer, retailer, labelling body, and focus group participants share common perceptions and valuations of the Ringerike potato belonging to the interpersonal and domestic worlds, such as uniqueness, distinctiveness, localness, and tradition. It seems to be a common understanding that the Ringerike potato is valuable because of its traditional use in special dishes and for special occasions, and also its geographical descent seems to be recognised as a special feature of the potato. Regarding its eating qualities, the producer emphasised the good taste and cooking qualities. At the same time, consumers had a more diverse quality perception, where social conventions of preparing, cooking, and eating potatoes affected consumers’ valuations. In the focus groups, comparisons with other varieties became part of the quality evaluation that highlighted several features important for consumers. Convenience was one aspect that was considered important, meaning that the ‘bumps’, shape, and size were seen as problematic

in the preparation of the potato, and it stood out from how potatoes are usually marketed with even shapes and sizes. The producer was seemingly aware of this, thus explicitly on the packaging describing the ‘bumps’ as ‘natural dimples’ – as in a smiley face, bringing in positive connotations. The discussion in the focus groups also demonstrated how social conventions and expectations, for instance, eating a potato with or without the peel, could negatively affect the use of the potato. Interestingly also, the strong social conventions (domestic world) between the occasion (festive), the dish (traditional), and the food (Ringerike potato) on the one hand served to maintain interest and use of the potato, especially among local consumers. On the other hand, the producer also saw a danger in associating Ringerike potato too much with traditions and the domestic world, and wanted a more innovative promotion connecting the potato to modern dishes, such as recipes for ‘spiced’ and ‘salt-baked’ Ringerike potatoes printed on the packaging (inspired world).

Even though the Ringerike potato has been included both in the GI system of Stiftelsen Norsk Mat and in the Food Treasure scheme of NorgesGruppen for many years, sales have declined. All three players, the producer, labelling body, and retail chain, viewed the two labelling schemes, PGI and Matskatter, as a way to distinguish the Ringerike potato from other, more generic potato varieties, with a special emphasis on conventions belonging to the domestic world, such as its heritage and culinary tradition. Differentiation means that one can extract an additional price in the market due to unique taste and quality. However, in the retail market, diversification is not the primary market strategy; rather competition on price is a main driver to attract customers and increase sales (market world). The Ringerike potato case shows how these different worlds (domestic and market) and strategies (quality and price) are opposed to each other. This was exemplified in our study by how the price campaign for almond potatoes just before Christmas negatively affected the sales of Ringerike potatoes. As a result, marketing strategies that emphasise price over quality negatively affect the effort to increase both the share of speciality products in the market and consumers’ awareness of the specific quality characteristic of GI-labelled products.

Concluding remarks

In this chapter, we have taken a closer look at the Ringerike potato, which is only one of many potato varieties that are in danger of extinction, but which we believe represents a general case for food products that do not fit into the conventional food system dominated by industrial and market conventions. Labelling schemes such as PGI are intended to help consumers make informed choices in the market, but the principles and understandings behind the labelling are, in this market context, subordinated to the industry and the market conventions’ focus on efficiency, standardisation, and volume. Local food is said to be a growing niche in the food market. However, many traditional, local varieties are in danger of disappearing. The Ringerike potato case shows that this variety is disappearing because it falls short in the competition with other varieties in the ordinary market context. The

conventional explanation is often a lack of consumer demand; however, this study shows that it is the structural conditions in the general food market that undermine the diversity of crops and varieties and make them less available to the consumer. Thus, to give meaning to the phrase ‘eating to sustain’, significant changes in the general structures of the food market are needed to promote domestic, green, and civic quality conventions more strongly.

Both the farmer and the focus group participants had experience with alternative distribution and procurement channels, where the quality conventions on which the PGI label is based, to a greater extent, were safeguarded. A strengthening of this type of local sales and procurement practice could therefore be an important measure to preserve and further develop locally adapted food varieties. Alternative food networks are important for the development of small-scale, local food products. These often remain niches or isolated islands in the food system, and, consequently, are highly vulnerable to competition and change (Torjusen and Vittersø, 2023). Upscaling is often proposed as a strategy to strengthen these alternatives. Still, the question is whether the focus should rather be directed towards how alliances can be built locally (Laamanen et al., 2022). Our analysis shows that common understandings and conventions are shared, not only between consumers and farmers, but also with retailers, labelling bodies, and other players in the food system. The table is therefore set for the development of alternative ways for obtaining food, which also include actors and sectors with a seemingly looser connection to the food system, such as the school, health, and care sectors. The scope of this study was limited to a single country case. A follow-up study could compare similar cases across different countries to learn more about the mechanisms that enhance or inhibit the use and promotion of heritage foods in different food-system and national contexts.

Notes

- 1 In short, agrobiodiversity is defined as the subset of biodiversity, which contributes to agriculture and food production in any form (FAO 2019).
- 2 <https://www.agropub.no/fagartikler/bevar-gamle-plantesorter-ved-a-spise-dem>
- 3 The FOODIVERSE was an ERA-NET SUSFOOD2 and CORE Organic Co-fund 2019 project with contributions from the Research Council of Norway, grant no. 320943.
- 4 Lovdata. 2007. *Forskrift om Ringerikspotet*. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2007-06-25-695>
- 5 Retrieved 10 October 2024 from <http://www.ringerikspotet.no/index.php?id=128528>
- 6 Retrieved 10 October 2024 from <http://www.ringerikspotet.no/index.php?id=128528>
- 7 Half-fermented trout. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rakfisk>
- 8 Dried cod (stockfish) cured in lye. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lutefisk>
- 9 Lambs rib preserved by utilising curing, drying, and in some regions also smoking. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinnekj%C3%B8tt>
- 10 Retrieved 10 October 2024 from <http://www.ringerikspotet.no/index.php?id=128528>
- 11 Lovdata. 2007. *Forskrift om Ringerikspotet*. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2007-06-25-695>
- 12 Retrieved 10 October 2024 from <http://www.ringerikspotet.no/index.php?id=128528>
- 13 Lovdata. 2007. *Forskrift om Ringerikspotet*. <https://lovdata.no/dokument/SF/forskrift/2007-06-25-695>

- 14 Personal information from the department responsible for local food in NorgesGruppen.
- 15 <https://meny.no/Varer/tema/matskatter/>
- 16 <https://meny.no/tema/matskatter/matskatter-i-menyth/>
- 17 <https://stiftelsenorskmat.no/>

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9 Relationships and the storing of food

Household dynamics and informal food consumption

Matilda Marshall

Introduction

I believe that one should have a particular structure and order in refrigerators. In that regard, my husband and I are not alike. Despite this, we have managed to stay together for several years. I have calmed down over the years and do not get an outburst even if the jar of marmalade is placed on the ‘wrong’ shelf.

(Woman b. 1941, DAGF 2104)¹

The above excerpt gives an insight into how daily relations and differences about food are acted out and negotiated in everyday life. Different spaces in the home manifest borders between ‘mine’ and ‘ours’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, where potential conflicts and differences lurk (see, e.g., Löfgren, 2018). While battles occur around many domestic objects, food storage brings attention to intricate relations. Stocking up and storing food for meals to come could be understood as doing good for the household. The refrigerator does not merely stand in the kitchen; it is part of multiple food-related practices expanding over time and space (cf. Shove & Southerton, 2000). Through cooling and containing food, the refrigerator is involved in an extended nexus of food and meal practices, for example, planning, shopping, cooking, serving, eating, and binning. It is entangled in emotional and social situations and processes, such as the attempts to make a tasty and pleasant meal (Jönsson, 2018) and manifesting affection (cf. Miller, 1998).

Refrigerators and other storage spaces thereby accentuate emotions, norms, and expectations around food, relations, and sustainability. As entry points into everyday life, they give us access to relationships and networks connecting people and food within and beyond the household (cf. Warde, Paddock & Whillans, 2020, p. 394). Following Warde et al. (2020), food-related practices, such as storing food, are thus helpful in approaching kinship and alternative economic arrangements. Could these relations then have implications for how and why households engage in (un)sustainable food practices? By focusing on how different foodways and relationships are made visible in narratives of domestic food storage practices in Sweden, the aim of this chapter is to explore how relations unfold through food storage and consider how this may have implications for (un)sustainable food practices.

Food storage as practice

Metaphorically, food storage could be regarded as a waiting room or transit hall where beverages and foods are placed pending consumption (Marshall, 2021). Like standing in a queue or waiting for a dentist appointment, time does not stand still. Things happen due to a microcosm of norms, expectations, negotiations, and waiting practices (Ehn & Löfgren, 2010). Milk and condiments are moved in and out, order is negotiated and even argued over, as seen in the introductory quote. If stored incorrectly or for too long, food may deteriorate, rot, or be forgotten. Furthermore, storing food or other items is done purposely. As argued by Cwerner and Metcalfe (2003, p. 229), storage is a way of ‘ordering things in space and time’ and an attempt to impose some form of control over one’s life, for example, managing the idea of clutter. Food storage is dynamic, in constant flux, reflecting the household’s daily practices and how these change over time. As such, food storage – the practice and its contents – mirrors contemporary society and food culture.

To store food or other items is a practice. As discussed throughout this book, a practice can be described as doings and sayings that are, to some extent, routinely performed and recognisable by people engaged in the practice (Reckwitz, 2002; Warde, 2005). While a practice could be understood as an activity about which you could write a how-to manual, the practitioners may not necessarily agree on how the practice ought to be conducted (Warde, 2014, p. 291).

As presented in Chapters 1 and 3, following Shove, Pantzar, and Watson (2012), a practice is dependent on meaning, materiality, and competences to be performed over time and space. For example, the practice of refrigerating food is bestowed with *meanings* concerning health, taste, convenience, modernity, and freshness. It involves a set of *materials* and infrastructures like refrigerators, the electricity grid, food stores, and logistics. It also requires practitioners with the *skills and competencies* needed to operate the fridge and handle the food in an appropriate manner. Here I use food storage practices in the plural as there are different ways of storing food, e.g., freezing, refrigerating, or using a root cellar. Each storage space has its material characteristics and uses, as well as different histories, meanings, and required skills.

In Sweden, automatic refrigerators for domestic use were accessible in the 1920s and freezers in the 1940s. However, they became more widely accessible for households from the mid-1950s and during the 1960s, coinciding with increased economy, investments in new and improved housing, and standardisation of the kitchen (see, e.g., Thörn, 2018; Sandgren, 2018; Marshall, 2023a). The streamlining of food storage over the past century, with more dependence on refrigeration and fridges and freezers integrated into the kitchen layouts, ties people to specific food-related practices and obstructs others, which in turn influences food culture. Modern food storage has become increasingly dependent on the cold chain, fresh food, and electricity, impacting both food culture and the perception of sustainable food practices (Rinkinen, Shove & Smits, 2019; Marshall, 2022).

Food enters the Swedish home in many ways: through food stores, gifts, allotments, hunting, foraging, farmers markets, home deliveries, and food box schemes

(Joosse, 2014; Marshall, 2016; Samsioe & Fuentes, 2022; Bartlett, 2023). The food and beverages in refrigerators, cupboards, and wine racks connect with many different food-related practices. In the storage, food may also transform from edible to waste, often due to social relations affecting what is (or is not) eaten and gifted (Evans, 2012; Waitt & Phillips, 2016; Hebrok & Heidenstrøm, 2019; Salonen, 2022). Such relations also influence daily shopping and preparation of meals, since food manifests relationships, emotions, and ideals of parenthood (Miller, 1998; Molander, 2011). While past research on food practices often focuses on specific sites of consumption or relations within households, relations may also expand beyond the household. Consuming and storing particular foods are part of managing social relations and extended family, for example, through domestic hospitality (Mellor et al., 2010; Blichfeldt & Gram, 2017; Warde et al., 2020; Marshall, 2023a).

Past studies emphasise that food consumption is social, suggesting that food storage – the result of such processes and practices – is social. Food storage practices thereby connect to multiple trajectories and methods of how and why food enters (and sometimes leaves) the homes. Yet little attention has been given to how different relationships influence the storage practices and how these might influence (un)sustainable food practices. After the methodology, the analysis will first focus on the relations within the same household before moving on to how food storage practices connect different households.

Methodology

The chapter builds on 139 written replies to an ethnological open-ended questionnaire on food storage practices submitted between September 2019 and September 2020. The questionnaire was designed and distributed in collaboration with the Institute for Language and Folklore.² Respondents were provided a set of questions about food storage, food preservation, and crisis preparedness to encourage them to write about their past and present storage practices. Nordic ethnologists commonly use the open-ended questionnaire to capture perceptions and experiences of different phenomena from a large sample. It allows respondents to formulate in their own time and words; in this case, they were free to write as much or as little as they wished, either through a digital form, by email, or by physical letters. Since the material is based on self-reported accounts, the level of detail varies. Some submitted lengthy, detailed letters, while others provided brief paragraphs; narratives which, of course, have been filtered by the respondents. In contrast to ethnographic fieldwork *in situ*, the method does not enable follow-up questions or contextual descriptions. Yet it allows for collecting narratives and identifying patterns of people's everyday lives.

Respondents were born between 1929 and 1999 and represented different household compositions and locations all over Sweden. Thirty-five responses were written by men, 100 by women, three by both a man and a woman, and one without stated gender. Few were born outside Sweden, all in Europe. Whereas the age groups were evenly represented, the material mirrors a general over-representation

of middle-aged Swedish-born women respondents in ethnological open-ended questionnaires (Hagström & Marander-Eklund, 2005). Most replies were submitted before the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the subsequent rise of energy and food prices and inflation. The material tells little about households struggling with making ends meet, having sufficient food, or affording to pay electricity bills.

Due to the nature of the topic, the written replies contain details and memories of how food practices unfold in everyday life. The material has been analysed thematically, with an abductive approach bridging between the empirical material and theoretical perspectives. For this chapter, I have scrutinised the material for narratives describing or reflecting relationships within and outside the household. While the material is neither extensive nor unambiguous, it provides valuable glimpses into how relationships impact food storage.

Conflict and adaptation

The freezer is a black hole, my partner puts things into it, and I just take out ice cream. I don't like cooking food with frozen food as it must be defrosted [...] Otherwise, I mainly cook food on what is about to go bad, since I am stingy. This disturbs my partner; he wishes to eat what he fancies. According to him, it is a luxury we can treat ourselves to as we are no longer students. Thus, we have more household waste when I'm home as I cook more food from scratch [...] but have less food waste. When he's at home, we'll have more plastic because of more frozen food and more food waste as he does not plan the dinner around, for example, milk with a short due date.

(Man b. 1981, DFU 41182:20)

Despite its often inconspicuous presence (cf. Freidberg, 2009, p. 18), food storage is integrated into daily food practices. Many people interact with refrigerators and pantries several times per day. Doors are opened, contents surveyed, and food items are removed, returned, or replaced. These continuous interactions manifest different habits and ideas of food ownership, edibility, and appropriateness (Evans, 2012). The above quote illustrates how different habits are brought to attention within the same household. While the couple has to some extent adapted their different food practices, some tensions and differences remain, resulting in various types of waste.

When moving together and establishing a joint household, people bring different food habits, tastes, and beliefs from their upbringings and past relationships. These may relate to economy, religion, and food culture, but also to habits such as what foods go in the fridge or not. The co-living articulates how former food practices are altered or abandoned. In some cases, this leads to different co-existing ways of storing food to accommodate various preferences:

Sweets are stored in the pantry, apart from the husband's chocolate, which he, for some unclear reason, wants to store in the fridge. My chocolate is stored in the pantry.

(Woman b. 1975, DFU 41182:6)

By contrast, the following example depicts an ongoing tug-of-war:

We disagree, however, about where to store bread. I want to have it in the pantry because it tastes better, but my partner wants to keep it in the freezer so it can last longer and toast it when it is taken out.

(Man born in 1990, DFU 41182:28)

The contents of and the different ways of handling the food storage illustrate how people adhere to different norms and value food differently. In some cases, moving together means attuning the storage practices to these different meanings. For others, disagreement over how the practice should be performed remains (cf. Warde, 2014) or results in co-existing storage practices.

A woman (b. 1929, DAGF 2096) writes that she has recently become a widow and is 'learning to keep a household for one person' (Woman b. 1929, DAGF 2096). In her condominium apartment's kitchen, she has a ventilated pantry and a combined fridge-freezer, complemented by storage space in the cellar (where an extra freezer is placed), attic, and garage. She writes about cooking large batches of food to freeze and notes that the freezers seem full all year around even if she tries to empty the stocks when it is time to defrost the freezer.

Moving together, relocating, separating, partners passing away, or children being born or moving from home are examples of how routinised ways of living are disrupted and altered. For example, having children changes the purpose, form, and content of meals, turning them into arenas for socialisation where values and ideals are communicated (Jönsson, 2018). The diagnosis of one person's food intolerance may cause the whole household to establish new – and sometimes co-existing – ways of storing and managing food as safety precautions (Cridland, 2017). The contents of storage change when relationships change. Hence, the refrigerator and other storage spaces must be understood in their social context.

Storing and eating practices are thus a result of adaptations and negotiations mirroring the social relations within the household. While routinisation is part of the formation of food practices, these can undergo major changes, for example, when the household composition changes. These relationships, negotiations, and norms about living together show that food practices can be reskilled, suggesting that if socially desirable or necessary, such practices can become more sustainable. However, being attentive to the existence of co-existing practices reveals the stubbornness of certain routines.

Hidden food and power dynamics

Sweets are stored partly in the kitchen, partly in a space that my children are unaware of.

(Man b. 1970, DFU 41182:113)

I hide sweets at the top of the cupboards or in an old hat on the hat rack to keep small fingers away.

(Woman b. 1988, DFU 41182:65)

The way people store food reveals that certain foods are kept secret or hidden from others. This suggests that unequal access to certain consumables or spaces involves power relations within the household. This is particularly notable when parents keep candy in spaces where children cannot reach or are unaware of.

Hiding sweets can be understood as a storage practice with strong meanings related to good parenting, health, and social norms of good/bad consumption. For example, the Swedish tradition of *lördagsgodis* (literally “Saturday candy”) stems from the attention to children’s poor dental health and the relation between sugar and caries in the mid-1900s. This led to a recommendation to limit the intake of sweets to one day per week. Saturday sweets have become a cultural phenomenon, organising the week and family rituals, and are embedded with ideas of health, discipline, enjoyment, and good parenthood (Johansson, 2005). This also connects to social sustainability in the sense of encouraging healthy food practices.

For similar reasons, alcohol is stored safely out of reach:

We store sodas, sweets, and alcohol on the kitchen counter or in a kitchen hatch. When the children were small, we had medicines and alcohol in the cupboard above the fridge so they could not reach it even with a chair.

(Woman b.1971, DFU 41182:70)

Keeping certain items, like alcohol, safe from children avoids unintended accidents and marks boundaries between child and adult consumption. While many household members interact with storage spaces, the practice of storing food – including managing the contents – is restricted. Not everyone in a household has equal rights or access to storage spaces and their contents. In the collected material, hidden food mainly concerns candy. It could be understood as a power relation where the intake of sweets and inappropriate foods is restricted through a top-down domestic hierarchy. However, hiding food could equally be a reaction against this hierarchy. While not mentioned in the material, we can assume that some children and adolescents hide sweets and alcohol from their guardians.

Adults also withhold sweets from their partners. The written replies indicate that people monitor, control, or help their partners limit their consumption of sweets:

I store sweets in a safe to which only I have the code, so my husband won’t eat it all in one go. He has absolutely no character when it comes to sweets [...]. The candy is vacuum packaged in glass jars.

(Woman b. 1969, DFU 41182:95³)

My husband sometimes buys sweets without my knowing and hides them somewhere. When I am in dire need of sweets (not too often), I'll ask him *Do you have any sweets? Yes, shut yourself in the bedroom, because I will fetch it from my secret hideaway.* Once I was fetching a new battery from a small drawer in our storage. And behold, there was a bar of chocolate. It has happened that I have hidden sweets but then forgotten where.

(Woman b. 1941, DAGF 2104. Italics in original.)

The safe and the drawer are used for separating some food items from the mutual storage. Through relocation into different storage spaces, the sweets become private and secret (cf. Löfgren, 2018, p. 31). The hiding could, of course, be intended for surprise, as an act of affection.

All respondents are adults with their households and economic resources, and are thus commonly in charge of cooking and food shopping. While not explicitly expressed in this material, in households with more than one person, someone likely has more influence over what food is stored and eaten. This suggests that managing food storage is also about managing economic resources and relationships, and upholding ideals of, for example, good parenting (see Molander, 2011) and steering household taste preferences towards healthy food consumption within the household budget. This relates to aspects of social and economic sustainability on a micro level. From a sustainability perspective, this protectiveness suggests that some people have more influence over the household's engagement with sustainable consumption. However, as the example of Saturday candy illustrates, these practices also connect to societal expectations of being a responsible and good parent/partner. Individual households' practices must be understood with the food culture(s) they adhere to.

Circulating food

My husband very much enjoys picking lingonberries and bilberries, so a few years ago we bought a smaller freezer for berries. I pack lingonberries in three-liter bags and take out six liters [from the freezer] at a time to cook [jam]. The ready-made jam is then placed in the refrigerator until some of it goes to children or grandchildren.

(Woman b. 1943, DFU 41182:44)

Hitherto, I have discussed relationships within the same household, but the written narratives also illustrate how food moves between households connected by kinship, for example, involving parents, siblings, children, grandparents, and grandchildren. While not necessarily occurring regularly, the exchanges indicate the practice of gifting and exchanging food items, in particular, homegrown and homemade food.⁴

When listing contents of the freezer, several participants mention fruit syrup [saft] made by mothers or mothers-in-law, the occasional homemade buns from grandmother's last visit, and treats for visiting grandchildren (see also Marshall,

2023a). Some of this gifting is dependent on the giver's (living) conditions and access to a garden or certain products:

I have not had homegrown vegetables since my parents stopped having a summer house, but occasionally I get some rhubarb from my daughter; otherwise, I buy.

(Woman b.1929, DAGF 2096)

Exchange or circulation of goods is another form of movement of food between households. One woman (b. 1965, DFU 41182:21) in a two-adult rural household mentions that she tends to share edibles with her two grown-up children. Others tell about a reciprocity:

Some autumns, I pick mushrooms; my family used to pick mushrooms and berries to make jam. My mum usually picks too many lingonberries, so we swap – she gets a few kilos of cucumber from me to pickle, and I get lingonberry jam.

(Woman b. 1979, DFU 41182:103)

One man, who has different freezer habits than his partner, mentions that his parents sling honey. Some of this honey is found in his pantry, but as he hardly eats any, it is often made into hampers with, for example, jam, to be gifted to other people (DFU 41182:20). While not as present in the material, the jar of honey highlights that not all gifted food is appreciated and may potentially result in food waste (see, e.g., Evans, 2012; Hebrok & Heidenstrøm, 2019).

Exchange is dependent on the possibility of meeting one's family. A response from a woman who immigrated from the Balkans highlights how transnational families may both restrict and enable food transactions:

I don't pickle, salt, or make jams. My mum visits once a year and brings 10–12 jars of lemon/fig/quince jam, 1–2 jars of pickled capers, and 1–2 bottles of homemade carob/walnut/cherry liqueur. She usually leaves >10 lunch boxes in the freezer.

(Woman b. 1987, DFU 41182:91. English in original.)

Left in the storage after the visit are not only food items, but also preservation of her mother's care and the food culture in her former home country. Consuming the edibles allows the faraway relatives to be present in everyday life.

The examples above are primarily homemade, homegrown, and preserved products often made by female family members. By contrast, meat has a different position in the exchange network and involves male relatives to a larger extent:

My son hunts and provides us with deer and elk, which I freeze in.

(Unstated, DAGF 2100⁵)

In the croft, we have refurbished the kitchen and have the same fridge/freezer [as at home], a modern pantry with pull-out drawers, and an extra small chest

freezer under the stairs. It isn't easy to get space for everything now that we grow vegetables, and my sister's husband hunts and sells meat to us [...]. The meat from my brother-in-law comes in vacuum bags that we store in the freezer.

(Woman b. 1966, DFU 41182:117)

Wild game meat is often thought of as local and sustainable meat (Marshall, 2016; Bartlett, 2023). Since most of this meat never reaches food stores, access is limited and sought after. It is primarily obtained directly from a hunter and sometimes involves monetary exchange. Having hunters in the family, therefore, enables stocking up on this precious meat.

The stored gifted products mentioned by the respondents involve practices like hunting, slaughtering, foraging, preserving, and baking, which not everyone can take part in. These practices depend on location, hunting licences, skills, time, physical capacities, or access to a garden or similar. Through relationships and networks, these items find their way into storage spaces, although such gifts are not necessarily appreciated. Hence, food storage allows insight into foodways and practices that are often invisible in consumption statistics. Access is, however, conditional, the circulation of foods is disrupted when ageing bodies cannot pick lingonberries, someone moves or relationships end. Furthermore, this highlights unequal access to, for example, elk meat, since people lacking certain social relationships and networks may be excluded from non-commercial and collectively sourced foods perceived as sustainable.⁶

Sharing food storage

I live today in a condominium with two rooms and a kitchen in [large city]. My grown-up son has one of the rooms due to the housing shortage in the city. We have a dry pantry, fridge, and freezer. We still have access to the root cellar in the countryside (my ex-husband still lives on the farm) where we store homegrown potatoes, carrots, and leeks.

(Woman b. 1958, DFU 41182:46)

While almost every Swedish household today has access to a refrigerator and freezer space, upon closer inspection, food storage is not as private and individually operated as one might imagine. Several respondents write about collaborating and sharing storage space. As argued elsewhere (Marshall, 2023a), storage space is precarious for many and does not necessarily accommodate everything that the households wish to store. Berries and vegetables harvested during summer and autumn pose a recurrent storage problem, which some have solved by gaining access to other people's storage spaces:

During summer, I get access to a freezer at some friends' place in the countryside to store all the berries I pick.

(Woman b. 1949, DFU 41192:62)

A man (b. 1981, DFU 41182:116) writes about the lending of freezer space for his berries at a nearby friend's during autumn, since he only has a freezer compartment in the refrigerator in his 18m² rented apartment. This is repaid by lending out storeroom space. Others lend storage space within the family. In contrast to the freezer, food cellars and root cellars with their specific storing conditions are not something every household has access to. Only a few respondents mention lending space to others. One woman (b. 1966, DFU 41182:82) writes that one of the two large freezer boxes in the barn is used by their son. A man (b. 1976, DFU 41182:97) mentions that his mother needs an extra freezer as 'she continuously picks too many berries and then stores them in my freezer'.

One woman says that they have one fridge/freezer in their kitchen and one freezer in the basement of their house. The previous owners left the latter, and she reflects that they would probably not have obtained one themselves, but, when it broke down, they decided to replace it with a second-hand freezer. This freezer has a particular role in their extended family:

The freezer in the basement acts as an extra space for items we use a lot of, but it has also become a storage space for elk meat in our family. My husband's family deposits meat after the elk hunt. Every now and again, during the year, they come by to collect some piece of meat.

(Woman b. 1984, DFU 41182:64)

The extra freezer has found a purpose and is filled up cooperatively.

This sharing hence connects to the relationships mentioned in the previous section. Lending storage space enables alternative food practices beyond the commercial food chain, e.g., growing vegetables and picking berries. While this could be related to norms and habits connected to Swedes' natural lifestyle and food culture, it also suggests a form of self-sufficiency, albeit very restricted.

Sharing and collaborating are, of course, not a new phenomenon. One informant recollects her childhood:

My grandfather had a root cellar in which potatoes, root vegetables, jam, and fruit syrup were stored both for my grandfather, for my aunt [name], and for us. Very well used, one could say today. We were almost like an extended family, but with two houses a little distance from each other. Very much was done together, one borrowed and collaborated.

(Woman b. 1954, DAGF 2093)

Storage practices involving collaboration must be understood in connection to the surrounding society and changing norms. When the freezer was new and expensive, a common way to access this technology was through freezer lockers, which were often organised collectively.⁷ Today, refrigerators and freezers are standard features in most Swedish homes. Contemporary storage infrastructure supports certain practices and upholds demand for electricity and fresh food (Rinkinen et al., 2019; Rinkinen, Shove & Marsden, 2020; Marshall, 2023a). Since home infrastructure endorses individual food storage, this suggests that only those who actively choose

to or have no choice will share storage space. Sharing storage could potentially be more efficient, as it theoretically reduces demand for purchasing additional storage and thus electricity consumption.

To sum up, sharing storage voluntarily might not be widely practiced, yet it brings attention to how relationships and networks are involved in the storage practices and enable – and potentially restrict – consuming homegrown, foraged, or hunted food. Besides the social aspects of having procurement networks outside the commercial sector, these foods are the result of certain food practices bestowed with meanings of self-sufficiency and (social, ecological, and economic) sustainability.

Concluding discussion

When zooming in on the performance and meaning making of everyday storage practices, household dynamics and networks beyond the household are brought to light. How can this be understood with enabling or restricting sustainable food practices?

Why certain foods are eaten or stored in a particular way is a result of negotiated norms and habits. When people move in together, separate, have children, etc., these norms and habits are illuminated, challenged, negotiated, and adapted. Food practices are thus dynamic; they change over time and are influenced by other people. However, these changes are not necessarily a result of equal negotiations. Food practices may also illustrate household hierarchies and relationships. Past research has shown how consumption is often done to show affection, e.g., purchasing specific items that one's partner or children appreciate (cf. Miller, 1998). In similar ways, we can understand the hiding, safeguarding, and gifting of food as expressions of love for one's kin, which often resonate with norms and expectations in society.

Sweden was for a long time an agrarian country with a food culture shaped by the so-called storage economy; that is, the need to preserve and store food to last from the annual harvest season until the following year. With increased urbanisation, the introduction of electrical refrigeration, and the shift from a production to a consumption society over the 20th century, most Swedes today rely on the food store rather than having a long-term food stock at home. Yet, solely focusing on commercial food procurement when investigating food practices risks overlooking other critical food networks.

The collected material contains many examples of how food moves within and between households, particularly those connected through family relationships. Foremost, this seems to involve non-monetary transactions through foraged, homemade, and home-baked products, but to some extent also sharing of storage space or purchasing wild game from related hunters. Such transactions highlight unequal access to foods and practices perceived as more sustainable (e.g., wild game, root cellars, sharing space) due to people's accommodation and place of residence. Foraging for one's food or filling up a large root cellar is not an option for everyone. Some sustainable food practices may also be restricted by people's

(non)existing relationships and networks. This calls for more research to explore if and how aspects such as class, gender, ethnicity, and rural/urban relations play a role in engaging in sustainable food practices.

While this chapter has focused on the relational dimensions of storage, the materiality of storage also conditions households' food practices. In modern housing, food storage spaces are often standardised in shape and volume, relating to the intended number of residents. In rented apartments where tenants can seldom choose or change their storage, one could also argue that the materials, i.e., refrigerators, freezers, and cupboards, determine which food (storage) practices are possible. This standardisation disregards alternative economic arrangements (cf. Warde et al., 2020), for example, that people may grow vegetables in an allotment, be gifted food from family members, or occasionally obtain half an elk. Since food (storage) practices change over time due to age, interests, household composition, relationships, and society, one size does not necessarily fit all needs or accommodate changes over time. Standardised storage may potentially restrict people from engaging in practices perceived as more sustainable, for example, growing their vegetables, making preserves, or storing food for several months.

To fully understand why and how people engage with sustainable food practices, we also need to be attentive to how different relationships enable or hinder these practices. In this chapter, I have only focused on self-reported accounts; further qualitative studies within the home and the storage spaces could expand the knowledge of how relationships shape daily food practices and (un)sustainable eating.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Quotes are labelled with the archive's accession numbers. All quotes, unless stated, have been translated from Swedish to English by the author.
- 2 The questionnaire was distributed both as a digital version (DFU 299, archived at the Uppsala branch) and a non-digital version (DAG 37, archived at the Gothenburg branch). Respondents were informed about how the material and their personal details would be managed and gave their consent by submitting their answers. For a more extensive methodological discussion and the full questionnaire see Marshall (2022, 2023a).
- 3 The quote has previously been published in a blogpost about the project: <https://www.isof.se/lar-dig-mer/bloggar/folkminnesbloggen/inlagg/2020-10-06-fran-lyxiga-kylskap-till-coronabunkring>
- 4 Since this chapter focuses on the (extended) family, I have excluded gifting and exchange with friends or the gifting of food products and alcohol for social gatherings and celebrations.
- 5 This quote also figured in the above-mentioned blogpost.

- 6 Many social initiatives – often facilitated through information and communication technologies (ICT) – for connecting people with producers, recirculating and sharing food, urban gardening and similar projects could also be understood as alternative ways for sustainable consumption (see, e.g., Davies & Evans, 2019; Samsioe & Fuentes, 2022).
- 7 For a more extensive history see Finstad (2022) and Marshall (2023b).

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Bridge 2

Virginie Amilien and Jean-Loup Lecœur

The three chapters of the second part delve into food practices through varied yet complementary perspectives, shedding light on the tensions between sustainability, food diversity, and cultural or social priorities. By examining family, community, and systemic contexts across different countries – France, Australia, Sweden, and five European nations – they uncover how food practices are enmeshed in complex dynamics where routines, social relationships, and environmental imperatives intersect. Using diverse qualitative methods such as ethnographic fieldwork, focus groups, and open-ended questionnaires, these studies offer nuanced insights into how local contexts and broader systems shape food consumption practices. Together, they underline the complexity of food practices and enrich the previous part. Moreover they emphasise the urgent need for an effective socio-ecological transition, demonstrating that sustainable food practices require balancing individual choices, cultural norms, and structural constraints to enable meaningful change. It appeared obvious then to connect everyday food practices to thoughts on socio-ecological transition in a third part.

The concept of transition, widely invoked in environmental and food discourses by both researchers and policymakers, has evolved significantly over time. The term ‘food transition,’ first introduced by Barry Popkin (1993), originally addressed nutritional challenges, linking stages of transition to issues such as malnutrition, obesity, and diet-related diseases (Lecœur, 2024). By the 2010s, the concept expanded to encompass dietary shifts aimed at environmental sustainability, such as reducing meat consumption and increasing plant-based protein intake. Today, it embraces broader socio-cultural, economic, agronomic, and nutritional dimensions. We speak here of a socio-ecological transition to signify a profound transformation of society across multiple dimensions to enable more sustainable ways of living.

Margaret Mead’s work on changing eating habits during World War II provides a foundational insight: to change food practices, one must first understand them. Building on this idea, we can introduce the concept of ‘normalised destruction’ to describe our everyday consumption habits (Lecœur, 2024, p. 21–22). Practices such as heating or air conditioning our homes, frequent travel, or relying on ready-made products are perceived as ‘normal’ and taken for granted, yet they are deeply tied to pollution, Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and environmental

degradation. This disconnect between the actual impact of these habits and collective perceptions is rarely addressed, and critiques often remain marginal – such as suggesting a slight reduction in heating temperatures from 21°C to 19°C.

Building on this perspective, yet from distinct angles, the third section of this volume seeks to move beyond this ‘normalised destruction’ by addressing the collective and political dimensions of food systems. Without placing undue blame on individual consumers, it instead considers food systems as embedded within larger societal structures. Although many authors, including Saujot et al. (2024) with their lifestyle approach, have already explored this path, we aim to consider new and complementary avenues in this part III.

The overarching aim of this volume, following the crucial point Mead underlined, is to understand what everyday food practices are. In the third and final part, three chapters take an innovative approach by proposing experimental methodological tools to investigate these practices. They explore food practices as a foundation for facilitating a socio-ecological transition, offering novel methods to bridge the gap between understanding and action.

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Part III

Further thoughts on transition and research tools on sustainable food

‘Imagine all the people sharing all the world’



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10 The body in everyday food practices

Becoming-with and attuning-to lived embodied entanglements

Roberta Discetti

Introduction

This chapter discusses the role of the body and processes of embodiment in everyday consumption, with a particular focus on food practices, to contribute to ongoing conversations on socio-ecological transitions. Embodiment can be defined as the human corporeal experience of the lived body, the profound inter-corporeality of all phenomena (Dale & Latham, 2015). This lived experience is pre-reflexive and pre-cognitive; it is about making sense of the world and is intrinsically part of being-in-the-world, but it is also a precondition for inter-subjectivity: embodiment is possible only through the corporeality of the other outside the self (Wolputte, 2004).

Drawing on post-structural feminist theory, particularly the work of Donna Haraway, this chapter argues that socio-ecological change must be understood and enacted through the entangled, affective, and situated experiences of living beings. Feminist philosophy has long emphasised that moral understanding is grounded in embodied experience, and that the interdependence of bodies forms the ethical basis of social relationships (Giilligan, 1993; Tronto, 2020). By making visible the corporeal, relational dimensions of consumption, this chapter will advocate for a rethinking of ontologies, epistemologies, and methods beyond abstract, disembodied models of transition. This translates into adopting a relational ontology that privileges relations over individuals (Haraway, 1991); a hermeneutic epistemology that focuses on collaborative meaning-making (Drake & Radford, 2022); and research methods that are attentive to the experience of the lived body (Latham & Wagner, 2021), both human and more-than-human, such as multi-species ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). As such, this chapter embraces an approach that is grounded in lived, multi-species, and situated experiences, essential for supporting transformations that are not only sustainable but also just and meaningful in embodied and situated ways. Adopting these theoretical coordinates will reframe research as a process of embodied transformation, rejecting any promises of objectivity from a distant critical stance, to embrace becoming actively and corporeally part of the field (Latham & Wagner, 2021).

The chapter will focus on three main themes drawing from Haraway's work: first, leveraging the notion of *becoming-with* (Haraway, 2008), it will explore food practices such as making, preparing, and eating food as multi-species entanglements.

Then, employing the concept of *cyborg-knowing* (Haraway, 1991), it will discuss the research practice of attuning to the lived body (Latham & Wagner, 2021) to generate a visceral politics of food (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2008). Lastly, through the concept of *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988), it will discuss Indigenous food practices as an example of embodied and relational knowledges (Drummond, 2020). In centring the body and its entanglements within the human and more-than-human world, this chapter reorientates socio-ecological transition research toward relational, embodied, and situated modes of knowing and being. By drawing on feminist theory and embodied methodologies, it highlights how food practices offer a fertile terrain for understanding and fostering change that is deeply rooted in lived experience. The approach advanced here does not seek detached objectivity but instead embraces a visceral politics of situated knowledge, interdependence, and corporeal participation.

Bodies becoming-with other bodies: multi-species entanglements in eating practices

Feminist thinkers argued for a critical deconstruction of the entrenched binary oppositions that underpin much of Western ontology and epistemology – particularly the privileging of male over female, mind over body, culture over nature, and reason over emotion (Butler, 2006; Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). In this critical deconstruction, the theoretical contributions of post-structural feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway are essential to overcome reductionist dualisms and give visibility to the material entanglements that make up everyday life. In a series of interrelated works, Haraway dismantled the assumption of separation of human and non-human, culture and nature, science and art (Haraway, 1991; 1992; 2003), to craft an ontology that is inherently relational. Relational ontology emphasises that beings do not pre-exist their relationships – they emerge through them. Instead of viewing individuals (human or more-than-human) as autonomous and self-contained, Haraway argues that all entities are fundamentally interconnected through shared corporeality and vulnerability (Haraway, 2003). One of the central concepts in Haraway's relational ontology is *becoming-with*, which indicates that beings are formed through their bodily interactions with others, rather than existing as isolated entities: becoming is always *becoming with* – in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake (Haraway, 2008, p. 244). This inter-bodies co-evolution demonstrates how relationality is inherent and foundational to existence (Haraway, 2008). Her work on companion species (Haraway, 2003, 2008) expands this interdependence to human and more-than-human bodies, exemplifying how relationships between humans and other species are not just ethically significant but ontologically constitutive. These relationships create significant otherness, wherein species derive meaning from and through their interactions and co-existence with one another (Haraway, 2008).

These concepts represent important starting points for the study of everyday food practices. Haraway's notion of *becoming-with* inspired food studies exploring how humans, animals, and plants shape each other within food systems. Rather

than viewing animals and plants as passive resources for human consumption, Haraway's approach urges us to recognise them as actors, subjects, and protagonists within food systems. Her work informed theoretical and methodological approaches, such as multispecies ethnography, moving animals, plants, fungi, and microbes from the realm of *zoe* (bare life) to the realm of *bios*, with biographies and political rights (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010). Aligning with these theoretical coordinates means recognising animal lives as critical subjects and articulating them as subjectivities rather than objectified commodities. In this deconstructive work, critical animal studies offer further important standpoints (Taylor & Twine, 2014). Critical animal pedagogies, for example, oppose the exploitative and extractive relations humans hold with animals. Using Foucauldian theory of subjectification, Fransberg (2024) explores how animals are subjected to disciplinary power and normalised as food for human consumption; this leads to criticising the concept of 'farmed animals', as farming is what is being done to animals, not what they are. Studies of livestock farming have also observed how farmers and animals form affective and material relationships through daily routines of feeding, breeding, and milking, which constitute co-produced sites of care and power (Holloway et al., 2014; Holmes et al., 2025). These practices are sites of productive paradoxes as producers of livestock farming enact contradictory roles of empathetic carers of animals and economic producers of sentient commodities (Wilkie, 2005). Similar reflections have also been raised on insect farming. While this is often portrayed as an alternative and ethical alternative to livestock farming, it is important to consider dimensions of more-than-human labour and ecological impacts (Gjerris et al., 2016).

These approaches bring the body to the foreground, including animal bodies. This is important, as it allows us to move away from the abstract and opaque concept of meat to the lived experience of the live animals. For example, Klaure et al. (2023) tackled the issue of meat loss and waste involved in food systems, namely animals that are killed for human consumption, but whose meat is never consumed, as it never reaches the plate (meat loss) or becomes household waste (meat waste). They calculated that, in 2019, 77.4 million tons of meat were either lost along the food supply chains, throughout the phases of production, storage, handling, processing, or distribution, or wasted during household consumption. While this data is opaque when articulated as food waste, it becomes alive when translated as the lives of 18 billion animals who were raised and slaughtered but whose meat was never actually consumed. This refers to the absent-referent in Adams's (2015) seminal work on the politics of meat eating, which refers to the lack of acknowledgement of the suffering and killing of animals in the practice of meat eating. While ethical farming tackles the worst aspects of livestock farming, it has been argued that ethical farming imaginaries appease the troubling feelings arising from the animal machine and the reality of killing experiences (Sahakian et al., 2020). Critical animal studies showed that, even in animal farms where animals are kept for socialisation and leisure purposes, not for food production, the lives of animals are considered through human-centric perspectives. For example, in animal farms for youth development initiatives, where youth and animals develop a relationship

of trust through continuous embodied engagement and playful bonding, the animals perform unrecognised emotional work, as they are constantly catering to the emotional needs of different youth cohorts (Fransberg, 2024).

These theoretical coordinates, accompanied by the empirical applications above, show the complex ethical entanglements that emerge when we foreground bodies – both human and more-than-human – in food practices, and the intimate multi-species embodied relations that constitute making and eating food. A relational and embodied ontology will prime us to see that processes of making or eating food are not solely a human activity, but a complex multispecies process, entangling humans and more-than-human agents – from animals and plants to microbes, fungi, and insects. Drawing again on Haraway's notions of *becoming-with* (Haraway, 2008) and *companion species* (Haraway, 2003; 2008), research is exploring eating as an act of interspecies relationality, where food consumption is not only about ingestion but a series of ethical, relational, ecological, and embodied entanglements (Paxon, 2008; Turner, 2019; Van Daele, 2022). For example, exciting work has been conducted by Tsing (2015), who investigates the multi-species assemblages that form around matsutake mushrooms: since this type of mushroom resists domestication, its (re)production is achieved not through human control, but through attunement to ecological cycles, mutual dependency, and more-than-human labour. From this perspective, eating becomes an assemblage bringing together humans, animals, plants, fungi, and microbes into mutual becoming, where food is not a passive recipient of consumption practices, but an agential participant in multi-species interaction (Van Daele, 2022).

One of the most compelling areas of multi-species scholarship in food consumption is the study of fermentation as a collaborative process between human practices and microbial agency (Paxon, 2008; Hendy, 2021; Modi, 2023). Fermentation is a biological process in which humans, animals, plants, fungi, and bacteria meet and interact; being a central process in food systems and human and ecological health (from producing alcoholic drinks to generating global pandemics), it shows that human and microbial cultures are fundamentally intertwined (Hendy, 2021). For example, Paxson (2008) coined the term *post-Pasteurian cultures* to describe artisanal cheese makers' intimate relationships with microbial life: while regulatory frameworks and industrial norms indicate only pasteurised food as safe (albeit hyper-hygienic), post-Pasteurian cultures indicate non-pasteurised food as safe, healthier, and more ethical, as it is produced through a collaborative ethic of living based on microbial co-agency, rather than elimination. Similarly, in an ethnographic study on fermentation as a multi-species ethical entanglement, Modi (2023) worked with migrant women of colour in communal kitchens, framing fermentation as a joint, embodied practice that values microbial cultures as essential to planetary metabolic ecology.

These reflections can be pushed even further, to identify the act of eating as a collaborative bodily act among different microscopic ecologies (Flachs & Orkin, 2021). New scholarship at the intersection of biology, social sciences, human health, and ecology has become interested in the notion of food consumption as collaborative human and more-than human effort, taking place in the invisible

ecosystems within our bodies, also called the probiotic turn (Lorimer, 2020). Research on the gut microbiome underscores a fundamental ontological shift: humans are not isolated, self-enclosed individuals, but assemblages of human and microbial agency, collaborating to digest, assimilate, and transform food, with important consequences for human and environmental health (Turnbaugh et al., 2007; Maller, 2023). Eating then becomes a practice of becoming-with together: humans become-with the food they consume, and the world becomes through these mutual dependencies; all living beings are in a way eating off each other, starting from microscopic organisms (Åsberg, 2024).

The attention to the bodies that make up food consumption allows us to reframe eating as a symbiotic act, where digestion is not solely a biological function but a process of ongoing negotiation between human and microbial life. Looking at eating through the lens of the body transforms it into a deeply relational practice, shaped by multi-species dependencies, ecological entanglements, and affective encounters. Whether through the fungal growth of mushrooms in forests, the microbial transformation of milk into cheese, or the maintenance of internal gut ecologies, food consumption is always a multi-species choreography – an act of becoming with others. Haraway's theoretical lens provides the tools to unsettle anthropocentric assumptions and embrace the messy, lively, and embodied connections that constitute what it means to eat: not only do we become what we eat, but, more precisely, we become-with what we eat. Such a view challenges individualistic models of consumption, instead positioning eating as a shared, ethical act of interdependence. By highlighting how bodies, human and more-than-human, are mutually shaped through these entanglements, this approach supports an embodied socio-ecological transition that values care, reciprocity, and interdependence within the web of life.

Attuning to the lived body: a visceral politics of food

From an epistemological perspective, a focus on the body and relational ontology translates into a recognition of knowledge as inherently embodied. In her seminal work *A Cyborg Manifesto*, Haraway (1991) coined the term *cyborg-knowing* to indicate that knowledge is always relational, situated, and embodied, and invites us to rethink binaries of nature/culture, human/animal, to adopt a post-disciplinary approach to the study of everyday life. Cyber-knowing indicates that there is no outside objective position to take to observe, only relational and ethically charged stances: rather than relying on critical analysis at a distance, it immerses in real engagement with the phenomenon under study, and it stays 'implicated, messy, and dirty' (Åsberg, 2024, p. 133).

This epistemological premise reinforces the ontological stance that beings and their understandings of the world arise from relationships and their contexts – from their bodies *becoming-with* other bodies. These theoretical coordinates have important methodological implications, as bodily becoming and corporeality can become sites of experimentation and research exploration. For example, Latham and Wagner (2021) reflected on what embodied experimenting entails for

researchers committed to corporeal research, and what bodily transformations are being traced and how. They theorised *attunement* as a methodological practice, namely the intimate ethnographic attention to the field and the craft of becoming through embodied engagement. Attunement to the lived body means attention to the embodied processes of becoming; they highlight the generativity of the body as a tool and as a site of knowledge production: our understanding of the world emerges from our bodily capabilities (Latham & Wagner, 2021). Similarly, Drake and Radford (2022) proposed a post-structuralist feminist hermeneutic methodology to study consumption practices. Their framework centres on embodiment both in the data collection and analysis process, based on the principles of listening, questioning, and hospitality. These three pillars are embodied practices whereby a researcher orients towards another person through *attunement* and openness to becoming-with. The researchers task, they argue, is that of attuning to how participants experience their bodies in a way that is unique to their biography, and to ask: where are bodies, ours and others, located in the listening process? And how can we make space to hear what is being said? (Drake and Radford 2022)

Adopting a methodological approach that is attuned to participants' lived and felt experiences, both human and more-than-human, generates important novel coordinates for the study of food practices. First, attuning to bodily experiences in food practices translates into identifying and exploring emotions and affects connected to food. Scholars have stressed that everyday food practices require a focus on embodied meaning-making, and emotional and affective practices are fundamental processes of embodiment and integration of meanings, materials, and competencies (Koskinen, 2024). Affects and emotions constitute a 'practice template' that supports practitioners in making sense of food consumption practices; they are a quality of practice and play a central role in how practices are adopted, performed, and revised (Molander & Hartmann, 2018). Processes of embodiment are also central in the ways in which everyday consumption practices move from a regime of conscious and planned action to a regime of fluid, routinised familiarity (Amilien et al., 2022). Second, attuning to the body allows us to visualise the bodily processes of perception and memory involved in everyday consumption (Wallenborn & Wilhite, 2014). From this perspective, the body serves as both a site of knowledge and a medium through which social norms and material conditions are negotiated. Probyn (2017) highlights how eating is an intensely corporeal act that entangles taste, desire, memory, and cultural identity, where the bodily sensations (i.e. hunger, satiety, enjoyment, disgust) are deeply embedded in social and cultural meaning. In other words, considering the body as a bio-socio-material nexus (Gordon et al., 2022) will allow the emotional, affective, sensorial, and social dimensions of consumption practices to emerge. Lastly, the method of attunement can be extended also to affective atmospheres, attending to how the body experiences the surrounding environment and how lived experience emerges from interactions between body, space, and materiality – for example elements such as movement and light (Bille & Simonsen, 2021). This spatial and sensory awareness also connects to the material arrangements of environments, such as

household design, shared spaces, or interactions during everyday life (Wallenborn & Wilhite, 2014).

Bringing together these reflections, attuning to the study of internally felt, sensory, and affective dimensions of food experiences constitutes a *visceral politics of food*: while food scholarship often separates beliefs about food (mind) from the experience of eating (body), it is important to recognise that taste is not just cultural or social, but deeply visceral, shaped by emotion, memory, and embodied histories (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2008). Research attuned to bodily responses such as affects and emotions has stressed important embodied findings, such as the physical and emotional sensations of lightness associated with plant-based diets (Venkatraman et al., 2023); the visceral yuck sensations generated in the case of novel and culturally inappropriate foods, such as insects (Volden, 2024); and the intense sensation of disgust and guilt associated with meat consumption and intensive farming methods (Sahakian et al., 2020; Koskinen, 2024). Eating practices are also used to reinforce bodily and gender identities: for example, meat-eating practices are often used by young men to communicate and reinforce their masculine identity, associating meat consumption with physical strength, muscle building, and athleticism (Adams, 2015; Vrijnsen et al., 2025).

Attuning to bodily dimensions not only brings about novel empirical findings but also has important political consequences. For example, Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2013), applied a visceral politics of food to the study of alternative food movements, such as school gardens and cooking programmes, that present food education as neutral and universally beneficial. Through ethnographic observation of children's food practices, they demonstrated that food education ignoring the visceral, emotional, embodied, and social complexities of how people (especially in marginalised communities) experience food risks reproducing food inequalities and leaving some individuals feeling left out and isolated. We therefore need research that is attuned to participants' lived experience and attentive to their embodied biographies, as well as open to the researchers becoming-with the researched. This will allow for novel or neglected perspectives to become visible, leading to the following proposition explored in this chapter.

Whose knowledge counts? Indigenous embodied food knowledge

Haraway's notion of situated knowledges (1988) challenges the notion of objective, universal knowledge, arguing instead that all knowledge is partial and culturally and historically embedded. The theoretical device of *situated knowledges* has encouraged food scholars to emphasise the local, embodied, and experiential aspects of food practices, with particular attention to Indigenous food practices. Embodied ontologies and epistemologies are foundational to Indigenous peoples' ways of knowing, which are inherently relational: Indigenous knowledges emphasise relationality with the living earth, problematising Western anthropocentric, individualistic, reductionist, and abstract paradigms (Drummond, 2020). For example, Australian Indigenous cultures are grounded in narrative embodied knowing and sensory ecological awareness, including ways of hearing, touching, tasting, but

also ways of imagining and intuitiveness (Cameron, 2002). These insights open important avenues for the study of food practices from an embodied and relational approach. However, before exploring the embodied affordances of Indigenous food knowledges, an important caveat is in order: while the distinction between Indigenous and Western philosophies is important, it is also important not to reify Indigenous or Western thinking into monolithic and singular entities (Brigg, 2016). To avoid falling into this theoretical trap, for the purpose of this chapter, we will discuss how several studies conducted by Indigenous scholars, or pertaining to Indigenous knowledges of food practices, allow for a deepening of the embodied and relational paradigms proposed above, with no pretence of exhausting the intricate reflections among different worldviews.

A recent review of the literature highlighted that Indigenous food knowledges are most connected to understandings of ecological balance and biodiversity protection (Vayona et al., 2025). Food practices such as foraging, preserving, or fermenting are not simply utilitarian tasks; they are acts of knowing, rooted in the land, the seasons, and traditional knowledges (Knorr et al., 2025). This includes the knowledges of foraging, preparing, and cooking plants and seeds with medicinal value, passed through generations, and held especially by women (Sing et al., 2020). Such practices are viewed as forms of resistance and epistemic agency, rather than just domestic labour (Corntassel, 2012). Several studies are available to elucidate these points. For example, Nichols (2022) explored Indigenous communities' embodied understandings of the nourishing properties of different types of rice in the Madhya Pradesh state in India. The author reported how government programmes on nutrition-sensitive agriculture focus on rice productivity rather than nutritional quality, overlooking residents' embodied understanding of how different types of rice impact health. The study revealed that residents preferred the Indigenous types of rice to the government's improved rice, as the former gives the body strength, a long-lasting feeling of satiety, and deep nourishment, as well as pleasure and enjoyment. This embodied knowledge of the nexus of food production, eating practices, and health was systematically overlooked by government officials and NGO workers, who instead promoted the 'improved' versions of high-yielding rice. Similar tensions between Indigenous food practices and external pressures are reported in the study by Niko (2025), illustrating the practice of Ngitemp, or rice harvesting, among the Indigenous Dayak Benawan communities in Borneo, Indonesia. The study explains how, within the Ngitemp practice, several families in the village are brought together, including young and elder members, for the practical purpose of harvesting, but also for the spiritual aim of celebrating the abundance of the land and the connection between the community and the environment. The author reported how this sacred ritual of gratitude to the land for nourishment, and human reverence for the ancestral land, is at odds with threats of displacement and loss of ancestral lands from globalisation pressures. Here again, government-led initiatives disregard Indigenous knowledges of food practices, with their embodied and relational components, in favour of abstract, disembodied, standardised, and productivity-focused food programmes.

A further example of the tensions between embodied knowledges held by Indigenous communities and disembodied and standardised approaches led by government initiatives is portrayed by Garth (2023), who examined the interrelations between Santiago de Cuba residents' food knowledges and government guidelines. The author studied the relationship between ingestive practices of eating and drinking, and embodied understanding of healthy or unhealthy food based on traditional knowledge and colonial entanglements. While Cubans develop their understanding of food that is good for the body through a combination of sensory experiences, traditional Cuban knowledge of humoral medicine, and embodied practices, modern medicine and national guidelines of healthy diets are at odds with this embodied understanding. For example, while modern nutritional guidelines recommend increasing the consumption of vegetables, Indigenous knowledges consider these cool (good for the body) or hot (bad), depending on the type, ripeness, and preparation. Another interesting example is that of sugar: this food is central to the island's diet, as well as to its history and colonial past, and is a common ingredient thought to give energy and vitality to the body, refreshing from the heat and alleviating exhaustion. This Indigenous and embodied understanding of sugar is again at odds with modern medicine and government guidelines, which instead recommend not to consume this food. These examples demonstrate how often traditional and Indigenous embodied knowledges of food practices are disregarded by government initiatives and modern medicine. Embodied knowledge is necessary to protect Indigenous health, whose rights and experiences are often obscured and neglected in Western medical and health practices; this is grounded in colonial imagination belittling Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing as myths (Drummond, 2020). Taking an embodied approach to research means validating embodied Indigenous practices as legitimate ways of knowing, resisting epistemic hierarchies that favour abstract, disembodied knowledge. This theoretical stance has important implications for the study of food practices, as this approach invites the researcher to study and give visibility to those practices constituting an act of resistance, cultural preservation, and food sovereignty, against the pressures of globalisation, displacement, and cultural homogenisation (Niko, 2025). From this perspective, adopting an embodied approach to the study of food practices is not merely a theoretical exercise, but an effort to re-establish and replenish ethical encounters with the beings – whether humans, animals, plants, fungi, or microbes – that support the production and reproduction of what we call food.

Concluding remarks

Post-structural feminist hermeneutics holds that language is significant as it constructs meaning; as such, language and reality are under continuous co-construction, and knowledge is never absolute but always a situated, subjective, and politically charged process of interpretation and meaning-making (Drake & Radford, 2022). From this perspective, employing Haraway's concepts of becoming-with (Haraway, 2003), cyborg-knowing (Haraway, 1991), and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) for the study of food practices has important political

repercussions. In Haraway's work, there is no focus on identity or place, as everything is nature-cultural, already enmeshed and interconnected: this allows us to adopt hybrid, relational ontologies that destabilise binary thinking (Åsberg, 2024). This perspective primes us to ask different questions related to food practices. For example, while Western consumers are often preoccupied with personal health and nutrition, they often display a mechanistic understanding of the body as a tool and a unity in itself, rather than as grounded in a system of shared relationalities that support life (Dal Gobbo, 2024). This individualising view of the body obscures the politicising processes of socio-ecological regeneration in both human and more-than-human wellbeing; a regenerative and affective form of food labour, instead, takes into account the needs of all bodies – human, aged, ill, disabled, and more-than-human – to attune to a form of wellbeing that is relational, rooted in care, and aimed at the flourishing of all lives (Dal Gobbo, 2024). Other feminist studies have stressed the role of corporeal vulnerability in creating a sense of shared understanding and reciprocity, which fosters shared responsibility and an ethic of care for the commons (Mandalaki & Fotaki, 2020). Adopting a relational ontology allows us to focus on the relations and connections among entities within food systems, in order to visualise relationality and dynamic interactions among actors (Discetti & Acuti, 2025). Acknowledging these entanglements between human and more-than-human bodies and materialities is the first step towards developing an ethical relationship with them – what Dale and Latham (2015) call an ethics of embodied entanglements.

However, it is also important to stress that recognising ethical entanglements constituting food practices may risk diluting political urgency, unless paired with a structural critique of capitalist economies and food injustices. The body is not only shaped by power but can resist and reshape power through its judgements and responses: embodiment thus becomes a space for political activation, not just regulation (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2008). Embodied experiences (e.g. what feels good or right to eat) are produced through intersections of structural forces (e.g. race, class), knowledge systems (e.g. nutrition science), and material relations (e.g. taste, smell), therefore are not neutral: bodies are politically shaped, and different bodies are afforded different capacities to engage with food (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2013). It is important to recognise, for example, that meat overconsumption is deeply entrenched with gender identity and with unequal distribution of responsibility regarding environmental concerns and animal welfare (Vrijssen et al., 2025). We also need to question the idea that a healthy body is an end in itself – especially when it is not part of a good life enriched by meaningful social relations (Dal Gobbo, 2024).

An embodied approach to food practices compels us to move beyond individualistic and mechanistic understandings of the body toward a more relational, political, and holistic framing. It foregrounds the interdependence of human and more-than-human lives, urging us to acknowledge the corporeal and affective dimensions of food production and consumption as sites of ethical and political significance. Yet such an approach must remain attuned to the structural conditions that shape bodily experiences and food relations – especially those rooted in

capitalist logics and systemic inequalities. By integrating a feminist approach with a critique of power dynamics, we can begin to imagine food systems that are not only more just and sustainable, but also more responsive to the entangled needs and vulnerabilities of all beings involved.

In conclusion, the theories explored in this chapter provide an important contribution to socio-ecological transitions by centring embodiment, relationality, and situated knowledges in the analysis of everyday food practices. By drawing on feminist and post-structural thought, particularly Haraway's work, the chapter reframes transition not as a purely technological or behavioural shift, but as a deeply affective, corporeal, and co-constituted process involving human and more-than-human actors. This embodied perspective challenges dominant models of change that abstract away from lived experience, offering instead a framework grounded in mutual care, ethical entanglements, and the transformative potential of everyday practices. In doing so, it opens up new methodological and conceptual possibilities for socio-ecological research, attuned to the visceral, embodied, situated, and relational dimensions of how we live, eat, and become-with the world.

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11 Dialogue

A tool for new socio-ecological practices?

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Introduction

This chapter explores other paths to more sustainable consumption and discusses the involvement of research with ordinary citizens around the issue of socio-ecological transition. We will go beyond the observations and findings put forward in the previous chapters and reflect upon the different Hybrid Forums organised during the Strength2Food project, as well as Utopia Workshops and more general dialogic conversations. Building on an experiment mixing Hybrid Forum and Utopia Workshop, we propose here a reflection on the implications of the scientific posture at the time of the Anthropocene. In other words, we will go beyond the academic framework to engage ourselves in these issues.

The idea of this chapter is to explore how scientific inquiry, dialogues between different actors and collective imagination can converge to drive social transformation in the context of the Anthropocene. According to Luk Boukaert, ‘Anthropocentrism that puts humans above nature leads us in the long run to alienation from nature and over-exploitation of natural resources’ (Boukaert, 2023, p. 13)

Building on the hybrid experiences of mission-orientated innovation Utopia Workshops, as well as the Hybrid Forum, we reflect on how linking ordinary experiences to their political dimension implies that food becomes a democratic experience. Not in the sense of delegation of the aggregation of votes mobilised by a voting system or a form of government, but because it reflects life experiences, attachments to places, and various ways of inhabiting a territory. These are all social constructions that are likely to evolve throughout public debates and collective actions. A crucial question is how we can inspire society, local communities, and government to jointly experiment with new socio-ecological practices. And how might we shape the conditions for a pluralist and inclusive dialogue in society to transform it?

Rather than remaining within a purely analytical or technocratic stance, we reflect on our own posture as researchers embedded in the processes of socio-ecological transition. Inspired by participatory dialogical formats such as Utopia Workshops and Hybrid Forums, this chapter emphasises the epistemological need for engagement, reflexivity, community thinking, and pluralism.

The Utopia Workshop is based on the theoretical frameworks of Karl Mannheim (1936), Paul Ricœur (1986), and Ruth Levitas (2011, 2013). From here, we present

Utopia Workshops as participatory practices that cultivate imagination and democratic engagement. Finally, we bring these threads together to propose a hybrid epistemology, one that reclaims science's role not only in analysis but in co-constructing plural and just futures. Through this, we aim to articulate a scientific posture relevant to the political, material, and affective dimensions of transition. Hybrid Forum 2.0 is mainly based on *Acting in an Uncertain World: An Essay on Technical Democracy*, a book written by Callon, Lascoumes, and Barthe more than 20 years ago (Callon et al., 2001, Callon et al., 2009), a time when most decisions affecting local communities were based on the assessments of experts and specialists, with local knowledge and the expertise of community members being largely overlooked. Through this, we aim to engage diverse stakeholders in dynamic, democratic mechanisms that encourage knowledge exchange and collective problem-solving as socio-ecological transition.

These formats challenge the conventional divide between scientific expertise and lived experience by inviting citizens into processes of co-creation and deliberation.

To structure this reflection, we begin by outlining the contemporary crisis of value and its implications for our understanding of economic and societal worth drawing on Mariana Mazzucato's (2021) and Descola's (Descola et al., 2022) critiques of neoliberal capitalism. We then introduce the Utopia Workshop and the Hybrid Forum 2.0 as two, potentially complementary, dialogue methods. Following the presentation of the background and a detailed outline of each method, we provide then a sort of user guide designed to be sufficiently precise to enable other researchers to experiment with these approaches. In the final section, we offer both a comprehensive overview and critical reflections on our initial combined experiment, in which the Utopia Workshop and Hybrid Forum 2.0 (HF 2.0) were integrated into a single seminar.

Rethinking value and rethinking nature

Contemporary challenges, climate change, social inequality, global health crises, and economic instability demand responses that go beyond incremental reform. As Mazzucato (2018) highlights in her work, a fundamental rethinking of how we define and create value is essential. Central to this rethinking is the distinction between value creation and value extraction. Value creation refers to the dynamic interplay of human, physical, and intangible resources that results in the production of new goods and services. It occurs within the productive process. In contrast, value extraction is the act of reallocating existing resources, often through financial speculation or monopolistic practices, without generating new value.

Historically, value has been typically associated with Marxian economics, where it is seen as a function of labour: the more labour a product requires, the higher its value. This labour theory of value aligned with an objective understanding of production. Over time, however, this perspective shifted toward a subjective one, where value is determined by the price a consumer is willing to pay. This

reversal, from value-determined price to price-determined value, emerged alongside social and economic transformations in the late 19th century.

The result is a market logic in which price serves as the primary indicator of value. Activities not exchanged in markets are thus deemed to have no value. This disconnection between actual societal contribution and market valuation has led to systemic failures, particularly in how public services, care work, and environmental resources are undervalued.

Mazzucato (2021) argues that capitalism is undergoing a profound crisis, and addressing it requires more than technical fixes. It calls for a shared sense of purpose to redirect efforts toward common goals. This involves dismantling prevailing myths, such as the belief that optimal outcomes emerge spontaneously from competitive markets driven by self-interest. Public sector institutions, increasingly modelled after markets due to Public Choice Theory and New Public Management (NPM), have adopted principles that prioritise efficiency and competition over collaboration and long-term value. As Mazzucato demonstrates, this has resulted in higher costs, reduced service quality, and an overconcentration of power among a few firms.

A mission-orientated approach offers a path forward. Instead of fragmented, reactive policy, it advocates for ambitious, bold missions, such as achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), that require coordinated action across sectors. These missions must not only reduce harm but also actively shape and co-create markets rooted in values such as sustainability, equity, and resilience.

According to Boukaert, the relentless pursuit of endless consumption ultimately prevents us from fulfilling deeper, immaterial needs such as solidarity, inner peace, silence, time with family and friends, and a connection with nature; ‘in short, the possibility of a meaningful life’ (Boukaert, 2023, p.90). This, as Tellnes (2019) suggests, calls for the development of activities and projects that are enriching, life-affirming, and developing. In the recently published *Ethnographies of the Worlds to Come*, [*Ethnographies des mondes à venir*] (Descola et al., 2022), anthropologist Philippe Descola and comic book author Alessandro Pignocchi propose a reflection on socio-ecological transition, approaching it not from an economic or technical standpoint but from an anthropological and philosophical perspective. The work presents a political ecology of the imagination: imagining radically different societies is not a futile utopia but a concrete way of expanding the realm of possibilities. Drawing on Descola’s work on human ontologies — naturalism, animism, totemism, and analogism (Descola, 2009) — they deconstruct the dominant vision of nature *as a reservoir of resources* separate from the human world. This modern dualist way of thinking about nature is strongly challenged by other ontologies (animism, totemism, etc.) where non-humans are seen as social beings with intentions, rights, and even culture.

By valorising a diversity of social and political organisational forms, the authors advocate for coexistence between different worldviews, particularly between industrial societies, autonomous territorial collectives, and indigenous ways of life. Drawing inspiration from territorial struggles and indigenous movements to imagine forms of coexistence that are more egalitarian and respectful of non-human

beings, they invite us to dialogic democracy. By rethinking our relationships with nature, with others, and with the future, we can envision possible worlds where humanity is no longer at the centre, but in harmony with the living world in all its diversity.

In a chapter called 'The Shaman and the Scientist,' Descola and Pignocchi remind us that there are other ways of knowing the world beyond the dominant Western scientific model. Against the cold gaze of objectification, which keeps things at a distance to measure them, Amazonian peoples, such as the Achuar, whom Descola did fieldwork about, and with, offer a radically different path: to understand is to step into the being of another, to see through their eyes, to feel with their heart. The shaman does not dissect; he immerses himself. He does not decode the world; he participates in it. Here, understanding is an act of willingness, not a conquest, but a resonance. This demands openness to alterity, the ability to receive the intentions, emotions, and silent languages of both human and non-human beings. Where the Western researcher observes, the shaman converses. He does not seek general laws, but singular relationships. This shift in perspective is essential for us researchers, as it is for the Hybrid Forum: it is about making space for other ways of being, other truths, other voices.

Utopia and dialogue as method: Envisioning radical alternatives

To truly transform society, however, we must pair mission-orientated innovation with methods that stretch the imagination and open new pathways for collective action. Examples of such methods are the Hybrid Forum and the Utopia Workshop, which provide conceptual and practical frameworks for envisioning radically different futures based on bottom-up initiated processes.

Utopian thinking

Utopian thinking, with roots in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) and developed through sociologists and philosophers like Mannheim (1936), Ricœur (1986), and Levitas (2011, 2013), emphasises the importance of imagining what could be, not just what is. Mannheim, in *Ideology and Utopia* (1936), argued that the tension between ideology (which describes and stabilises the present) and utopia (which envisions transformative futures) is essential for societal progress. Ideology offers structure, norms, and predictability, but, without the contrasting energy of utopia, it can lead to stagnation.

Ricœur (1986) further warned that societies lacking utopian dimensions become static, while utopias disconnected from reality become illusions. Thus utopias must be grounded in present conditions while pushing beyond them. The close connection to process philosophy (Whitehead, 1967) is illustrated by emphasising that utopia is not a blueprint for perfect societies, but rather an aspirational framework that fuels hope and expands the horizon of what is politically and socially imaginable. Utopia is not a fixed point but rather an ever-evolving place of balance, continually created and constantly new.

Boukaert points out that hope is not the same thing as optimism: ‘Hope is the ability of work for something that is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed [...] but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out’ (Boukaert, 2023, p. 32).

Levitas (2013) advances this perspective by framing utopia as a method. She identifies three key aspects:

1. **Content** – Utopias articulate visions of desirable societies. These may include equitable wealth distribution, climate resilience, and optimal freedom under responsibility.
2. **Form** – Utopias may be expressed through fiction, speculative narratives, or detailed policy frameworks. What matters is their power to stimulate thought and debate.
3. **Function** – Utopias catalyse change. They critique existing conditions and serve as comparative models that inform and inspire transformation.

Levitas responds to critics who dismiss utopias as impractical by maintaining: ‘Utopia is not about the impossible. What is really impossible is to carry on as we are.’ (Levitas, 2013, p. xii). As global, national, and local institutions, including the UN and initiatives such as the Norwegian Official Report on sustainability (NOU, 2020) recognise, paradigm shifts are necessary. Utopian visions can inspire the imaginative and ethical shifts necessary to create new social contracts. Through empathy and dialogue, we can make our personal and intuitive judgements more representative and thus more global (in the sense of inter-subjective), a way of being and thinking that is also at the heart of the Hybrid Forum. Following Foucault’s perspective that utopias ‘are places without a real location’ (Foucault, 1984, p. 4), the Hybrid Forum would undoubtedly be closer to a heterotopia (Roman, 2015), in the sense it refers to real and concrete space, a ‘type of counter-spaces, a kind of utopia actually realised’ (Foucault, 1984, p. 5). Ideally, an HF 2.0 is a place where different rules apply, where social norms are set aside for a few hours to listen, talk, eat, and think together.

Dialogue, togetherness, and openness

The importance of dialogue in constructing a common project cannot be overstated, as it serves as the foundation for fostering a shared understanding and addressing controversies collaboratively. Drawing on Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism (Bakhtine, 1978), dialogue is not merely an exchange of individual ideas but a manifestation of collective discourse shaped by normative frames and historical contexts. Bakhtin highlights that dialogue is built from the ‘inside,’ encompassing not only spoken words but also non-verbal elements such as pauses, gestures, and practices. These dimensions of communication reflect the complexity of human interaction and reinforce the idea that dialogue is inherently relational and dynamic. Such an approach is crucial for navigating socio-technical controversies, as it allows for the

co-construction of meaning and solutions in ways that are culturally and socially sustainable.

A cornerstone of this approach is the promotion of democratic dialogue, underpinned by principles such as openness, equality, and transparency. Callon et al. similarly underline the transformative potential of dialogue, describing it as a mechanism for constructing a 'common world' through iterative processes of trial and error (Callon et al., 2009). Here, the aim is not simply to exchange ideas or reach a predefined consensus but to engage in a deeper dialogic and democratic process. Callon et al. (2009: 159) argue that the degree of democratisation is measurable by the depth, inclusivity, and quality of the dialogue. Furthermore, the structure of such engagements must facilitate equality of access, clarity of rules, and traceability of discussions (Callon et al., 2009, p. 163). These principles ensure that every participant, regardless of status or expertise, has the opportunity to influence the outcomes. By prioritising transparency and open access, these dialogues not only hold participants accountable but also invite broader public scrutiny, fostering trust and legitimacy.

Bakhtin's perspective also brings attention to the temporal dimensions of dialogue, highlighting its role in bridging the past and present to inform sustainable futures. This temporal aspect aligns with the objectives of democratic dialogue as described by Callon et al. (2009), where the process not only addresses immediate controversies but also opens pathways for future exploration and learning. By integrating historical and cultural contexts into the dialogue, participants can develop predicative models and solutions that are attuned to the complexities of their social and environmental realities. Ultimately, the act of dialogue becomes more than a means of communication; it is a dynamic, democratic mechanism for co-constructing a liveable and evolving world.

Utopia Workshops: A methodology for participatory transformation

Operationalising utopian thinking calls for inclusive, dialogical practices that connect collective intelligence, imagination and intuition. Utopia Workshops serve as dynamic arenas for co-creation, where individuals from diverse backgrounds engage in structured dialogue to articulate shared values and explore new possibilities.

These workshops challenge participants to move beyond conventional problem-solving. By creating space for uncertainty, dissent, reflection, and deep listening, Utopia Workshops reveal hidden opportunities for action and innovation. Participants learn to listen to themselves, to others, and to the collective interpretations that emerge through dialogue. All participants are actively engaged in the dialogue because the facilitators emphasise that lived experience is the only thing that matters. No one's experience is valued above another's, regardless of social status, societal position, or academic achievements, creating a space of mutual respect and equal voice. Everyone has experience that matters, and the combination of different perspectives fosters creativity and the emergence of shared values. This

inclusive approach encourages participants to listen openly and contribute confidently, knowing that their voice carries equal weight in the dialogue.

Utopia Workshops function as catalysts for both individual (consciousness) and collective (system) transformation. By encouraging imaginative engagement with societal futures, they help expand the perceived range of action. This imaginative space becomes critical when the existing ideological framework no longer provides sustainable solutions. When traditional structures are insufficient, the collective act of imagining alternatives fosters resilience and adaptability.

Because context matters, Utopia Workshops are flexible and must be tailored to the local cultural, environmental, and institutional landscape. Their impact is relational: they deepen ties between individuals, communities, and their ecological and cultural surroundings. Far from being abstract exercises, they enhance social progression by nurturing empathy, shared responsibility, and purpose-driven collaboration.

In doing so, they represent Hybrid Forums where knowledge, values, and experiences converge, spaces in which the asymmetry between expert and lay perspectives is not erased but negotiated, contested, and potentially reconfigured. In this, they embody the epistemological commitment to opening up science, embracing the ‘viscosity’ of lived concerns, and working toward empowerment through relational, grounded forms of knowing.

The phases of a Utopia Workshop: From experience to collective action

The Utopia Workshop is a participatory method designed to move participants from lived experience to shared values, and ultimately to actionable projects. It unfolds in three interlinked phases, cognitive, affective, and conative, each supporting a transformative learning journey. This structure is inspired by philosophical dialogue, participatory innovation, and theories of transformative change.

Phase 1: Grounding in lived experience (cognitive dimension)

The first phase is inspired by Socratic dialogue, particularly as interpreted by Leonard Nelson (1949), where participants explore a universal question through personal narratives. Rather than engaging in abstract debate, the dialogue begins with concrete experiences from everyday life, often sharing stories about meaningful moments in their local communities. These narratives become the basis for collective reflection and understanding. Through open and structured dialogue, participants move from individual anecdotes to a shared perception of what values underpin these experiences. As Nelson notes, ‘The Socratic method is not the teaching of philosophy, but the art of philosophising’ (Nelson 1949, p. X). In this sense, participants become co-investigators, engaging deeply with their own realities and those of others.

Phase 2: Identifying core values (affective dimension)

Once stories have been shared, the workshop transitions into a collective inquiry into the values that make these experiences significant. What made the story meaningful? What ideals or principles were at play? Through philosophical reflection, participants identify and prioritise values that resonate across the group. These values form a shared ethical foundation, what Ricœur might call a ‘horizon of hope,’ from which future visions can emerge. ‘Hope is the conviction that we are part of a meaningful whole that transcends us’ (Boukaert, 2023, p. 67). This affective engagement fosters empathy, mutual recognition, and a sense of belonging. It also sets the stage for transformative agencies, as participants begin to see themselves as capable of shaping reality based on what matters most to them.

Phase 3: Project prototyping and collective action (conative dimension)

In the final phase, participants are invited to translate shared values into practical initiatives. Drawing on the Open Space Technology approach developed by Harrison Owen (2008), this phase supports self-organisation, initiative, and collaboration. Participants develop project ideas that embody the values identified in Phase 2 and propose them to the broader group for feedback and refinement. The emphasis is on action: forming working groups, proposing actionable steps, and exploring how diverse projects might align and reinforce each other. The aim is not only to imagine alternative futures but to begin enacting them through collective action. To support this movement from values to action, we draw on Otto Scharmer’s Theory U (2009), which distinguishes between learning from experience and learning from the emerging future. As Scharmer argues, ‘The second type of learning, learning from the future as it emerges, is still largely unknown’ (Scharmer, 2009, p. 7). Utopia Workshops cultivate this second mode by helping participants access deeper sources of knowing, intuition, imagination, and aspiration while remaining grounded in context.

From narratives to transformation: The u-shape of the process

Inspired by Scharmer, we understand the process in a Utopia Workshop as U-shaped: from lived experience (cognitive) through shared values (affective) to collective experimentation (conative): see Figure 11.1. This curve reflects the tension between ideology and utopia: between the stability of existing frameworks and the generative energy of imagining otherwise. Rather than smoothing over differences, the workshop process works through them, surfacing latent conflicts, facilitating deliberation, and enabling alignment around shared intentions.

The tension between Ideology (‘what is’) and Utopia (‘what could be’) gives energy and direction for the change processes. By combining open dialogue with flexible, participant-driven structures, the Utopia Workshop fosters the formation of new ‘publics’ capable of envisioning and enacting change. It offers, not

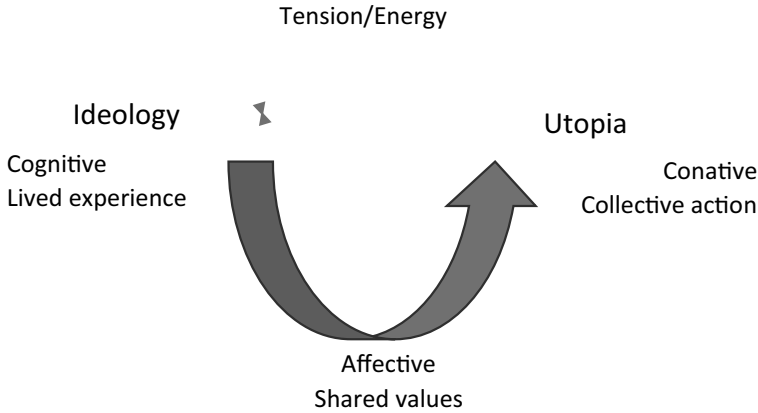


Figure 11.1 U-shaped Utopia Workshop. Source: Ove D. Jakobsen

The picture represents the tension between utopia and ideology, underlining that the Utopia Workshop builds and gathers cognitive and conative experiences through shared values.

a utopian blueprint, but a democratic method for co-producing futures, rooted in everyday life, animated by values, and orientated toward action.

Hybrid Forum: A methodology for participatory democracy

Hybrid Forum 2.0 (HF 2.0) is a space for public dialogue among people with different interests, backgrounds, and positions. This method was developed during the Strength2Food project (Amilien et al., 2019, Amilien et al., 2021) that builds on the ideas behind Hybrid Forums described in *Acting in an Uncertain World* by Callon et al., as previously outlined. It is a space for thinking outside the box. When you enter this space, where both sounds and people resonate, you need to set aside your preconceived notions, put down your baggage, feel, listen, and engage in discussion. Hybrid Forum 2.0 offers a Democratic Dialogue. Hybrid refers both to the blending of scientific experts and laypeople, and the combination of a seminar (where participants delve into a topic) and a public meeting open to all, while ‘forum’ (from the Latin *forum*, meaning ‘marketplace,’ where legal proceedings were held, <https://naob.no/ordbok/forum>) reflects a space for dialogue. The second generation of Hybrid Forum (HF 2.0) builds upon this foundation. There are many methods for participatory democracy in Europe, but many are either unclear, undemocratic, overly determined (with an agenda), or fail to provide people with sufficient opportunities to influence outcomes. Thus, HF 2.0 was developed to ensure genuine participation and equal dialogue among all participants on a complex subject relevant to the local community. In other words, HF 2.0 is a new way of gathering people to discuss important and often challenging topics. Instead of trying to find a single solution that everyone agrees on, HF 2.0 is about creating a space to understand each other better — even, or especially, when we disagree. In

a society where many issues are complex, and there is considerable uncertainty — such as those surrounding sustainability, food production, technology, and climate change — it is essential to be able to discuss topics openly. HF 2.0 provides such an arena. Let's have a look at the main ingredients of a Democratic Dialogue.

'Controversy as learning'

The first step in a HF 2.0 is to identify a controversy, that is important to the local community. Often, we think of disagreement and conflict as something negative. However, in a healthy democracy, disagreement can be a positive thing, as it shows and opens up the fact that many voices are being heard. When people with different opinions and experiences come together, they can not only express themselves but also learn from each other. Democracy does not consist merely of different voices being expressed but of the listeners of those voices. First, we are looking for a topic that sparks disagreement but also offers room to share different ideas and perspectives together. The resolution of the conflict is the goal; however, in a Hybrid Forum, it is the process that interests us most.

This is especially important in 2025, as various crises are generating a strong desire to 'avoid risks' created by uncertainty and avoid discussing difficult topics because they seem too uncertain. As a result, essential questions are not brought up in the public sphere. But with HF 2.0, we aim to do the opposite, to use controversies as a tool to engage people and develop new knowledge together.

Plurality through polyphony

The next step is to identify and include various voices. Once the topic is determined, the task is to invite and recruit participants to HF 2.0, between four and eight people who represent different opinions, perspectives, and interests. Diverse voices are invited to participate in an HF 2.0 workshop (aiming to gain a deeper understanding of the subject of the controversy of the theme being addressed.) To enhance knowledge in the field, we will also invite experts on the given topic to talk during the workshop. They may not agree with each other, but they will provide a brief presentation on the subject to stimulate the discussion and offer everyone yet another opportunity to think differently.

One issue is related to integrating 'invisible' groups, such as migrants and economically disadvantaged individuals, into democratic dialogues. Their voices are essential for ensuring inclusivity and equity, and it is the reason why we look after local controversies and invite widely to a public dialogue.

Openness

This leads to many different voices, but also to different ears. Openness is one of the key ingredients. It primarily involves listening to others' opinions without focusing on what you/we think yourself/ourselves. This implies that no one should be ridiculed when expressing their opinions. Openness is also reflected in

documentation and archival work, both to transparently show what was done and said, and for potential use in research.

The phases of a Hybrid Forum 2.0: From controversy to shaping a new path together

HF 2.0 is a participatory method designed to bring together experts and citizens to discuss controversial and complex issues, with the aim of fostering mutual understanding and collective engagement. Its primary objective is to create an environment where participants, through open and informed discussions, can explore solutions and ideas for the common good. However, it is the process of dialogue and exchange, rather than the outcome, that lies at the heart of this forum, fostering genuine inclusion and collaborative decision-making.

The HF 2.0 implementation takes place in three phases.

Phase 1: Workshop

The first part is a workshop with active participants. The seminar consists of an informational session, a Q&A segment, a discussion session, and a realisation phase.

A) Informational session:

This segment provides an introduction to Hybrid Forum 2.0, its underlying principles, and objectives. It emphasises the importance of both speaking and listening, underscoring that participants should not defend personal interests but focus on what is best for the collective good.

Rationale: understand the operational framework of HF 2.0, the importance of transparency, and the democratic approach inherent in the process.

B) Expert presentations:

In this phase, experts in the relevant field present their perspectives. Each expert will have approximately 10 minutes (or more, as necessary) to present their views.

Rationale: The inclusion of expert knowledge is important for providing participants with the information necessary to make informed decisions. Often, competing viewpoints are presented, and participants are allowed to ask clarifying questions.

C) Discussion session:

During this segment, all participants are given sufficient time to express their viewpoints and listen to others. The role of the researchers is not to contribute personal opinions but to facilitate discussion and ensure that all participants have the opportunity to speak.

Rationale: It is imperative that every voice is heard and that all participants are afforded an equal opportunity to contribute to the discourse.

D) Realisation phase:

This final segment focuses on articulating an informed decision. Participants are encouraged to express their views following the information, discussion, and reflection process.

Rationale: It is through the act of expression that an opinion is fully realised; it becomes tangible when shared within the group, facilitating mutual understanding.

Phase 2: Dinner

Following the workshop, the researchers invite all participants to a shared dinner, typically lasting a couple of hours, at a reputable restaurant. The act of sharing food is seen as an integral part of the process.

Rationale: Sharing a meal offers participants an opportunity to engage with each other in a more informal and personal manner, thus fostering deeper connections

Phase 3: Public dialogue

The third phase involves an open dialogue, where the broader local community is invited to participate. This stage offers an opportunity for broader discourse and enhanced community engagement. The session begins with a summary of the day's discussions, recapitulating the key points. Following this, the dialogue is opened to all participants. In this phase, the researchers do not actively participate but instead create a framework that allows all attendees the opportunity to speak if they so wish.

It is worth noting that, both before and after the implementation, other phases are crucial. In preparation for HF 2.0, we need to identify a relevant controversy, venue, participants, and experts, creating a brochure and posters while inviting everyone. We invite, broadly speaking, participants at the local level, looking for bringing marginalised voices into the Hybrid Forum. Both workshop and dinner (phase 1 and 2) aim at empowering people to participate more confidently and express themselves in a secure environment.

Following the completion of the HF 2.0, we need to assess the effectiveness of the forum and identify areas for improvement. This analysis is achieved through an evaluation process that involves gathering feedback from participants, analysing the outcomes of discussions, and determining whether the forum has succeeded in its objective of fostering democratic dialogue, creating understanding collaboratively, and facilitating informed decision-making.

Combining Utopia Workshop and Hybrid Forum

Experimental methodological approach to sustainability, local food, and dialogue in Lofoten

In this experiment, we aimed to combine both methods to see if they could complement and reinforce each other, especially since one seeks to reflect on the present.

In contrast, the other is directed toward the future. Therefore, a workshop titled ‘Lofoten as a Sustainable Food Destination’ was organised in September 2023 in Kabelvåg. The goal of such a workshop was both to stimulate dialogical processes and to develop ideas and projects, with an emphasis on local participation, value-based reflection, and creative problem-solving. A key principle in Hybrid Forums is that all participants are equal and can think and act together on a local controversy relevant to the present moment. In a Hybrid Forum, participants are invited to listen to each other, not only to understand that they are in the same boat, but to think together about how the boat can be saved. A key principle in a Utopia Workshop is that society needs living utopias to avoid stagnation. Utopias challenge established truths and inspire new ways of thinking. In a Utopia Workshop, participants are invited to look ahead, not just at what the future might become, but at what they *want* it to be.

Focus on food, community, and sustainability during the Lofoten workshop

In this section we try to describe simply and briefly an experience that consisted of combining a Utopia Workshop and HF 2.0. Although we aimed to merge Utopia Workshop and Hybrid Forum, it is, however, extremely important to note that both methods had to be drastically adapted to cover the experiment which could not last more than a few hours, as the full seminar last from 12.30 to 17.30 (including a common lunch, different sessions and breaks²).

Part 1 of the Utopia Workshop: The food landscape of Lofoten

The theme of this particular Utopia Workshop in Lofoten was local food, and the key question participants addressed was: *what does the future food landscape in Lofoten look like?* Through stories about local food culture (including stockfish, Lofoten lamb, seaweed, school gardens, and traditional dishes), values such as local sourcing, economy, cooperation, nature, and provocation were highlighted. Based on these values, the participants developed ideas for concrete projects, which were carried over into the second part of the workshop. These projects emerged from a dialogue process in which the participants’ own stories formed the basis for new visions. The aim was not to find ‘right answers’ but to explore future possibilities together.

The Hybrid Forums:³ Dialogue across disciplines and experience

HF1: ‘Eating in Lofoten’

In the first Hybrid Forum, local food and food culture were explored through discussions with chefs, farmers, and entrepreneurs. There was agreement on the importance of local food and sustainability, but also critical reflections on what defines ‘local food.’ For example, it was pointed out that some food products marketed as ‘traditional’ in Lofoten were not historically used locally, and that food

culture is constantly changing. Participants also questioned the overemphasis on stockfish and tradition, expressing a desire for more innovation and variety. The dialogue highlighted diverse perspectives and values related to food and identity, illustrating how Hybrid Forums can foster unexpected but valuable discussions (as whale is sustainable food for the Lofoten islands).

HF2: 'Local goats and national whales'

The second Hybrid Forum addressed the interplay between food production and tourism. Key topics included logistics, economic sustainability, and collaboration. Local networks and human resources were highlighted as critical success factors, but challenges such as high costs and difficult distribution were also emphasised. At the same time, it was questioned whether the focus on challenges might overshadow the many success stories. Several participants believed that good collaborative structures already exist in Lofoten, and that much of what is needed involves managing and strengthening existing initiatives.

HF3: 'Lofoten as a green destination'

The third forum focused on how to promote sustainable development. Tourism is fundamentally a resource-intensive industry, and participants discussed how it could become more sustainable through better resource utilisation, extended seasons, and stronger local anchoring. A central point was that local food should not just be a 'backdrop' for tourist experiences, but rather be integrated into daily life and the local economy. It was emphasised that, for food production in Lofoten to grow, both tourists and locals need access to, and an understanding of, the value of local food, not just as a product, but as part of a living community.

Part 2 of the Utopia Workshop: From vision to action

After the Hybrid Forums, participants returned to the creative part of the workshop. Based on the values previously identified, they developed three concrete project proposals:

- *Test kitchen with ingredients from nature*
A social and practical project where participants gather ingredients from nature, cook, and eat together. This promotes both knowledge and community.
- *Tourism and agriculture – cooperation to address tourist challenges*
An idea to bring together these industries to handle tourism pressure, for example through improved logistics, sustainable experiences, and local value creation.
- *Establishment of a local food council*
A council consisting of producers, consumers, and policymakers working together to strengthen local food production, consumption, and policy development.

These projects show how dialogue can lead to practical initiatives, rooted in local values and culture. Through such processes, not only are ideas created, but also trust and cooperation that can lead to real societal change.

An experiment in dialogue in practice

Although this experiment was not carried out under the required conditions, and therefore there is a gap between what we wanted to do and what we did, it still proved to be very interesting as a test. Moreover, it allowed us to develop a new, much more in-depth experiment that we are currently working on.⁴

The Utopia Workshop in Lofoten demonstrates how a combination of value-based reflection, local storytelling, and open dialogue can generate engagement and developmental momentum. By working with both ideology and utopia and involving a broad group of participants from the food and tourism sectors, a holistic understanding of challenges and opportunities emerges.

The Hybrid Forum sessions revealed that ‘local food’ is not a clear-cut concept, and that sustainability must be understood in a broad, local context. Hybrid Forums use controversies to challenge words and concepts taken for granted, opening the door to new ways of thinking together. The Utopia Workshop challenges the existing order, not through confrontation, but through cooperation and innovation. Both methods highlight not only society’s and local communities’ but also the individual’s inherent potential to create change.

Mission economy meets Hybrid Forum and Utopia Workshop

Bringing together Mazzucato’s (2021) mission-orientated approach with the Hybrid Forum and Utopia Workshop reveals a compelling pathway toward both the development of consciousness and systemic change. If we seek improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities we need a new vision of the economy. Mission Economy calls for reconfiguring public-private relations to co-create value for society. According to Robert Costanza, ‘Deliberative Democracy is based on the idea of that true deliberation, free from the distortions of unequal political power, is necessary for legitimate democratic decision-making’ (Costanza, 2023, p. 115). This aligns closely with the utopian imperative: to imagine better futures and to work collaboratively toward them.

Both frameworks emphasise participation, deliberation, and shared goals. Where Mazzucato seeks to embed purpose within institutional and economic design, the two dialogue methods push the boundaries of what those purposes might be. Together, they foster an ecosystem of innovation that is democratic, visionary, and grounded in justice.

Real transformation happens when institutions, communities, and individuals are empowered to imagine and construct alternative realities. Whether in climate policy, healthcare, education, or digital infrastructure, applying the principles of

mission orientation and utopia can unleash the creativity and courage needed to face complex global challenges.

A path to conclusion

In conclusion, we cannot solve today's crises with yesterday's logic. As Levitas reminds us, 'It is not a finished utopia we ought to desire, but a world where imagination and hope are alive and active' (Levitas, 2013, p. 220). To meet the challenges of the Anthropocene, science must be both reflexive and engaged: not only interpreting the world but contributing to its transformation.

The Lofoten workshop experiment demonstrated the powerful potential of combining a Utopia Workshop with a Hybrid Forum to foster transformative dialogue around food, community, and sustainability. While time constraints required adaptations of both methods, the collaborative process revealed valuable insights and concrete proposals that reflect the richness of local knowledge and shared values.

Food served as both a cultural anchor and a catalyst for innovation, through storytelling, shared meals, and creative project-making. In the dialogues, the participants focused on local food as a living practice tied to identity, ecology, and economy. The integrated workshop highlighted the strength of community-led initiatives. Whether through a nature-based test kitchen, a collaborative approach to tourism challenges, each idea was rooted in values such as cooperation, local knowledge, and ecological stewardship.

By merging participatory reflection with action-orientated thinking, the workshop aligned with the principles of both the Mission Economy and deliberative democracy. Together, these frameworks suggest that genuine transformation is possible when communities are empowered to imagine and implement alternative futures. In Lofoten, food became the starting point for a deeper conversation about places, people, and the sustainable pathways we can co-create together.

This demands that researchers embrace a posture that integrates knowledge with care, expertise with humility, and method with imagination. Through Utopia Workshops and Hybrid Forums, and mission-orientated strategies, we may begin to construct spaces where democratic experimentation flourishes, where new publics are formed, and where the future is envisioned as a field of possibility rather than inevitability. Such efforts aim to provide insights into shifting societal behaviours and fostering a paradigm shift from a focus on economic growth to prioritising greater well-being. This is the critical work that lies ahead, and it is a task that must be undertaken collectively. To initiate this process, we work now on the CONVIVIUM project, which serves as a foundational framework for exploring these transformative possibilities and fostering collaborative engagement. Stay tuned for the next episode at <https://convivium-neb-project.com/>.

Notes

- 1 Callon et al. (2009, p. 32)

- 2 More here: <https://oda.oslomet.no/oda-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/3171808/SIFO-notat%2B2-2024%2BLoften%2Bsom%2Bb%25C3%25A6rekraftig%2Bmatdestinasjon.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- 3 We keep here the general concept of Hybrid Forum, and not HF 2.0, on purpose, as we could not really follow the protocol.
- 4 For more details, see task 7.2 in <https://convivium-neb-project.com/>

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12 A taste of tomorrow

How food informs imaginaries of the future

Nina Heidenstrøm and Marie Cathrine Hebrok

Introduction

As a basic human necessity, food is a key element in shaping our vision of the future. Discussions about food futures are not only about what we might eat, but also about how we could live, organise society, and relate to nature, technology, and one another. From concerns about climate change and food security to innovations in agriculture and alternative protein sources, food serves as a powerful lens through which we imagine both utopian and dystopian futures. Our visions of food production and consumption mirror broader cultural hopes, anxieties, and shared values concerning both the present and the future.

This chapter examines the food futures envisioned in contemporary society, drawing on insights from the international research project IMAGINE – Contested Futures of Sustainability¹ – in which we understand imaginaries as networks of ideas, ideologies, utopias, dreams, and knowledge that are spun between actors and cultural contexts (Ricoeur, 1976). Our research has centred on three key practices of consumption – eating, dressing, and moving – and imaginaries of how these practices might evolve over the next 30 years. We have examined a diverse spectrum of imaginaries, including imaginaries perceived as possible, plausible, or probable, as well as idealised, catastrophic, and marginalised (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Our approach has aimed to transcend conventional scenario modelling, commonly used in climate and environmental sciences, emphasising the significance of *cultural imaginaries* in sustainability research (Ghosh, 2018).

How we imagine the future is shaped by how we lived in the past and how we live today. Some imaginaries become dominant, influencing public discourse and policy, while others are marginalised and have little influence (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). It is, therefore, critical to study both the grand narratives of societal development and the everyday imaginaries that emerge from lived experience. The most prominent imaginaries might not be the most desirable or feasible. Moreover, different groups envision different futures. In earlier work, we demonstrated how two Norwegian food provision services are grounded in contrasting future imaginaries: one centres on technological innovation, efficiency, and convenience, while the other emphasises ethical, social, and sustainable food consumption. These divergent visions give rise to distinct practices of acquiring food (Hebrok & Heidenstrøm, 2025). Some imaginaries are also powerfully disseminated through media and

popular culture. Research from the IMAGINE project reveals that these narratives are most often framed within dominant techno-futures, encompassing both utopian and dystopian perspectives, while imaginaries of social transformation emerge as contrasting and, at times, conflicting alternatives (Jakubiec et al., 2024).

The following chapter concentrates on the imaginaries of food futures. We have collected and analysed a range of such imaginaries across social groups and sectors to understand their content and influence. In collaboration with the Norwegian Ethnological Research (NEG) archive, we developed a qualitative questionnaire that invited the public to submit their own stories about how they imagined the future. Furthermore, we have collaborated with product design students at Oslo Metropolitan University (OsloMet) who have employed Speculative Critical Design (SCD) approaches to produce tangible imaginaries that provoke reflection and discussion about sustainable futures. The data material used in this chapter consists of the submitted stories about how people envision the future and design projects that involve food.

Just as past imaginaries have shaped our present food production and consumption, the imaginaries we hold on to today will shape the world of tomorrow. This prompts the critical research question: *What are the dominant imaginaries of food consumption today, and how do these imaginaries articulate potential trajectories of social change?* By examining contemporary imaginaries of the future through the lens of food, we will show how they are shaped by both fear and longing. On the one hand, there is a pervasive anxiety about societal collapse driven by climate change, political instability, and economic uncertainty. On the other, we find hope for the future, one in which humanity reconnects with nature and lives in socially cohesive communities grounded in care and mutual support.

In the sections that follow, we outline a theoretical framework for understanding imaginaries, with a particular emphasis on their narrative structure and application within speculative and critical design practices. We then describe the methodological approach used to identify and gather representations of dominant societal imaginaries. The first part of the analysis explores two overarching narrative patterns – those of societal collapse and communal resilience – that frequently emerge in imaginaries of the future. The second part examines three student design projects that materialise imaginaries of food consumption using prototypes, thereby making abstract future scenarios more tangible and open to critical reflection. Finally, we offer concluding reflections that draw together the narrative and material expressions of future imaginaries, demonstrating how food, both as symbol and practice, can articulate systemic challenges, while also signalling more connected, equitable, and sustainable ways of living.

Cultural imaginaries as stories and Speculative Critical Design

Cultural imaginaries as stories

The concept of imaginaries refers here to the collective ideas, images, symbols, and narratives that shape people's understanding of the world. These imaginaries are

shared frameworks within a culture or society, influencing how we think about and act in the world (Anderson, 1983). Thus imaginaries of the future are an integral part of our culture, understood as the systems of actions, symbols, and meanings through which we interpret the world (Geertz, 1973). Their embeddedness in our culture makes imaginaries powerful. They shape the basis of social norms, values, institutions, and practices.

Their power is evident in how we understand and manage the climate crisis. Author Amitav Ghosh (2018) has described the climate crisis as a ‘crisis of imagination’, a condition in which, culturally, we struggle to envision a future that breaks away from the patterns and trajectories of the present. This lack of new visions makes it difficult to generate alternative solutions that can address the complex challenges we face.

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur addresses this lack of new visions. In his work on imagination, he has emphasised that many of our imaginaries of the future merely reinforce dominant ideologies, thereby hindering innovation and critical thinking. Ricoeur (1976) distinguishes between two types of imaginaries of the future. Reproductive imaginaries (ideology) are those that reproduce the past or current situation. In this mode, the future is viewed as an extension of the present, focusing on transforming aspects of today’s societies to achieve future goals. Productive imaginaries (utopia), on the other hand, are creative, poetic, and generative. They go beyond merely replicating what is already perceived or known. Instead, they introduce novelty into our ideas about the future through new combinations of meanings, metaphors, and narrative forms.

In his later work on narratives, Ricoeur (Ricoeur & Jarczyk, 1991) explores how narrative imagination contributes to productive imagination through the act of storytelling (Can et al., 2002). Our lived experience is full of events, actions, and changes that are often messy and disconnected, which can feel chaotic and meaningless. By organising our experiences, ideas, dreams, and feelings into plots with a beginning, middle, and end, we can bind these pieces together in a meaningful sequence. The act of creating a story with a plot is not merely descriptive of an event; it is creative and interpretive, and thus productive. It reconfigures and reinterprets events, endowing them with significance and shaping our understanding of the world we live in. The productive function of imagination, then, is to construct meaningful patterns out of the flow of experiences in time. Productive imaginings of the future enable us to anticipate, envision, and experiment with all kinds of futures, ranging from what is possible to catastrophic or utopian visions.

In this chapter, we refer to narratives both as individual sense-making and as collective societal stories that influence norms, expectations, and actions. While the former focuses on how individuals interpret their lives through storytelling, the latter points to the dominant and competing narratives circulating within society that shape discourses, identities, and policy. In society, numerous narratives exist that define our culture and social lives. These narratives serve as guides for how we should, could, or want to live; they help us make sense of our emotions and provide moral frameworks and values (Franzosi, 1998). Yet narratives are continually in flux, with multiple societal actors striving to establish their version as the

dominant account. The narrative surrounding the climate crisis is a compelling example. Our understanding of the climate crisis is shaped by contrasting and often conflicting narratives from various actors with different agendas – those who produce the products and services we consume, those who formulate climate policy, the media we consume, and our own lived experience (Alexander, 2003). When analysing narratives about the future of food, we can identify possible courses of action for different actors in the future. What kinds of morals, values, and emotions are embedded in these narratives, and what forms of responsibility are assigned? Who, for example, is cast as the villain and who as the hero?

Speculative Critical Design – making imaginaries tangible

In response to the growing recognition of imaginaries as central to future-making, strands within design – particularly speculative and critical design – have emerged to question dominant narratives and explore alternative, often provocative, visions of the future. Design is increasingly leveraged not merely as a means of problem-solving or product development but as a critical tool for anticipating, interrogating, and reimagining societal trajectories. In this context, ‘critical design’ has emerged as an approach that critically interrogates underlying assumptions and values within society to provoke reflection (Boer & Donovan, 2012). ‘Speculative design’ takes this critical starting point and uses ideas of possible futures as tools to understand the present better and to discuss the kinds of futures people fear and desire (Dunne & Raby, 2013). Design as a means to critically examine modern society has emerged in a variety of approaches, including discursive design (Tharp & Tharp, 2019), adversarial design (DiSalvo, 2012), norm-critical design (Ehrnberger et al., 2012), and design fiction (Sterling, 2009; Bleecker, 2022).

Where critical design draws attention to taken-for-granted frameworks through what Michael (2012) calls ‘inventive problem making’, speculative design seeks to bring future possibilities into the present so that they ‘demand a response’ (Tonkinwise, 2014). This expanded role of design foregrounds the values and power structures embedded in our artifacts and environments rather than offering ready-made solutions. Through imaginative, visual, and performative practices, these approaches craft tangible representations of alternative realities, including physical prototypes, fictional documents, and immersive narratives designed to provoke, unsettle, and engage audiences on both affective and intellectual levels (Forlano, 2017). These varied approaches are often grouped under the broader term Speculative Critical Design, a strand of design practice and research that explores future imaginaries through critical inquiry and creative speculation. Originating largely from the work of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2013), SCD challenges dominant technological narratives by presenting alternative scenarios that prompt reflection and debate. While often referred to collectively, speculative and critical design are not synonymous, nor does SCD represent a unified methodology. Instead, it encompasses a diverse and evolving set of practices that vary in aesthetic strategies, political orientation, and modes of public engagement.

In the IMAGINE project, students have drawn on various elements of these different approaches, particularly on ‘Design fiction’, which is a prominent strand within SCD that combines rigorous scientific grounding with science-fictional storytelling to produce ‘diegetic prototypes’ that suspend disbelief and stimulate debate about technological and social change (Bleecker, 2022). We have called them provotypes, based on Hutchinson et al. (2003), which we will return to in the methods section. Rather than predicting a single outcome, design fiction constructs coherent worlds through catalogues, videos, simulated news articles, and other media, where speculative artefacts operate according to their internal logics, thereby opening discursive space for critical engagement with contemporary crises (Dunne & Raby, 2013; Hales, 2013).

Within design education, Critical Speculative Design offers students and practitioners a framework for examining the broader cultural, social, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of their work. By inviting them to imagine – and materially represent – both desirable and undesirable futures, SCD produces an awareness of design’s power to shape not only objects and services, but the collective narratives through which we understand and respond to environmental, economic, and societal challenges.

Methods and data material

This chapter draws on two data sources: stories about food futures from the Norwegian public and Speculative Critical Design projects, both part of the IMAGINE research project. The primary aim of IMAGINE has been to investigate the power of cultural imaginaries of sustainability in influencing societal change and to foster democratic spaces for researchers and laypeople alike to reflect on, experience, and discuss prevalent imaginaries of sustainable futures.

Stories about food futures

The stories consist of written texts submitted by members of the Norwegian public, referred to as ‘respondents’, who participated in a national qualitative questionnaire administered in collaboration with the Norwegian Museum of Cultural History’s digital archive, Minner, which is coordinated by the Norwegian Ethnological Research (NEG). In the spring of 2022, we distributed a questionnaire with four open-ended questions in a format that invited individuals to contribute personal stories and reflections about the future. The questionnaire is archived at the National Archives of Norway, serving as documentation of everyday life in Norway. The respondents were recruited through the museum’s contact list, social media platforms, and both professional and personal networks.

The questionnaire is entitled ‘Imagine your future life’² and starts with a small introduction:

The future is unknown – but how we imagine it, affects the choices we make in our daily lives. The Norwegian Museum of Cultural History invites you

to share some of your thoughts: When you think about the future, what do you imagine? How do you think people will live 30 years from now? How will they travel, eat, dress, and work? Which future do you fear? And which future do you aim for?

When pressing the button to submit a story, respondents were asked to answer four questions in text boxes with no word limitation. Each question has a main question (in bold) and a sub-text to prompt respondents.

1. **Think about the world 30 years from now.** What are your first thoughts? What images do you see?
2. **What developments do you fear?** What future worlds do we need to avoid?
3. **What developments would you like to see?** How would you like to live in the future? Feel free to start with daily life: How would you like to travel, eat, dress, live, and work? Or think of other things that are important to you: How will they be organised in the best possible future?
4. **How do we influence the future?** Which of our actions and choices today do you think have the most impact on the future? What do you think is needed for the future to become the way you want it to be?

To capture a broad spectrum of future imaginaries, we intentionally and openly formulated the questions. Notably, although the overarching research project focuses on sustainability, we did not explicitly ask about sustainability, climate change, or environmental issues. One question was, however, tailored to these themes by asking about future practices related to mobility, food, and clothing, all of which have high climate emissions.

As of January 2025, a total of 158 respondents had submitted their stories. These vary in length from a few words or bullet points to extensive texts, ranging from 300 to 2,700 words. Most responses reveal internal consistency, with the initial reflections in the first open question elaborated upon in subsequent answers. In our analysis, the respondents are referenced using the identifier NEG 277 (the questionnaire ID), followed by a respondent number (/1–158). All the quotes are translated into English by the research team. Demographic data such as gender, age, residence, and occupational background were optional and sparsely reported. As a result, we do not have sufficient information to conduct subgroup analyses based on these variables.

The dataset encompasses a wide range of imagined futures and societal domains. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus specifically on stories concerning food. To identify relevant responses, we first conducted a thematic coding, using ‘food’ as the primary search term. Additional keywords included specific food items, such as ‘meat’, ‘fish’, and ‘vegetables’, as well as production-related terms like ‘garden’, ‘farm’, ‘agriculture’, and the verb ‘to eat’. This allowed us to extract and analyse the subset of stories that explicitly address food and its role in imagined futures. The second coding consisted of identifying the types of stories, ranging

from utopian to dystopian, and examining how food was involved in these stories, as well as the trajectories of change the stories represented (or did not).

Works by design students

The IMAGINE research project went beyond collecting written future imaginaries by partnering with designers and artists to materialise imaginaries through visual, auditory, and physical provotypes. Master's students from OsloMet in Norway and Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands translated speculative scenarios into crafted products, services, narratives, and installations, provoking us to reconsider which futures we truly desire and why.

Design students who were part of IMAGINE worked on an assignment to create 'provotypes' that reflected on present imaginings of sustainable futures. Provotypes, a term introduced by Hutchinson et al. (2003), are designed artifacts that go beyond traditional technology probes by intentionally creating moments of disruption to reveal the unspoken norms and values that shape everyday interactions. Rather than simply collecting usability data, provotypes incorporate unexpected or challenging features that trigger reflection and conversation among participants (DiSalvo, 2012). In this way, they embody 'inventive problem making', using design interventions to surface underlying hopes, fears, and ethical considerations (Michael, 2012). By bringing speculative elements into real-world contexts, provotypes act as catalysts for critical dialogue, compelling users to confront the assumptions embedded in technology and to imagine alternative possibilities (Tonkinwise, 2014). The students we worked with could choose between the three main topics of the research project: eating, dressing, and moving. The assignment was to create prototypes that would engage an audience to participate not only in what might be the most probable or possible futures but also in potential dystopias and utopias.

In total, 32 OsloMet design students and 44 Eindhoven design students contributed to IMAGINE, producing a total of 43 provotypes. From these, six OsloMet projects were selected, each awarded exhibition funding, and shown at the House of Literature in Oslo in December 2024. The projects were selected based on an evaluation of the coherence and relevance of the narrative presented, and the physical and visual presentation of the idea (the provotype). The remaining projects were featured in an online showcase.

The exhibition guided visitors through diverse future imaginaries, ranging from techno-optimism and the interplay between governance and free markets to alternative models of consumption and production. It highlighted how a scenario deemed dystopian in one region may already be the reality elsewhere, underlining profound global inequalities in both the experience of, and discourses around, sustainability. By staging these prospective outcomes, the exhibition made dominant narratives visible and contestable. In this chapter, we have selected three provotypes that engage people in food-related questions such as: How might we be able to survive if we had to forage all our food? Will our current and future models of food

consumption exacerbate inequalities related to access to quality food? Moreover, are the dystopias we imagine already the present reality in other parts of the world?

The fear of societal collapse and the longing for nature and community: Food as a lens on imagined futures

Food production and consumption are closely tied to the fears and futures people desire. Interestingly, these utopian and dystopian imaginaries are often interwoven. In this first section of the analysis, we present two dominating imaginaries of the future – societal collapse on the one hand and the rekindling of the relationships with nature and social communities on the other. Through the lens of food, we get a glimpse into these futures and how they are imagined.

Respondents frequently began their written stories about the future by describing their greatest anxieties: the total collapse of society, war, the erosion of democracy, and the depletion of natural resources. Food and water shortages were imagined, provoking massive waves of climate migration and increased social inequality, dividing those who can afford sufficient nutrition from those who starve. This imaginary has previously been described in the IMAGINE project as the ‘crisis ladder’, a story of gradual societal collapse (Kjus et al., 2023). As a counter to this dystopian outlook, many respondents expressed hope for a future where local communities collectively produce and consume food. Our analysis, therefore, focuses on the dynamic relationship between fear and hope and how imaginaries of food futures reflect broader conceptions of societal futures.

Societal collapse

Many of the respondents feared environmental destruction caused by climate change, as well as social unrest, war, and the breakdown of communal ties. The loss of fertile land and biodiversity due to environmental degradation was used as an illustration of increasingly vulnerable societies. These changes were not intended to impact all populations equally – marginalised groups were often seen as being at the greatest risk, and the unequal distribution of food resources was expected to increase the likelihood of conflict.

Historically, food insecurity has fuelled protests, revolutions, and the downfall of governments, such as the French Revolution, which was sparked in part by food shortages and stark class disparities (Tilly, 1971). In a future where food systems are privatised or monopolised, access to food could become a matter of political control rather than a democratic right. Thus, in these imagined futures, food becomes a symbol of democracy’s fragility and a key site where fears of societal collapse are articulated.

One respondent envisioned a future of a gradual societal collapse, where drinking water plays a pivotal role as the planet’s most valuable resource:

Thirty years into the future is not that far away. How will we live then?
We’re talking about the year 2054, and I will be very old, perhaps even dead.

But my children will surely be alive then and may even have children of their own. I envision an increasingly dire flow of refugees, almost a flood wave of climate refugees from the south to the north. They are fleeing drought, floods, unliveable conditions, heatwaves, lack of food and water. Norway has access to drinking water. Water becomes the new oil. The new gold. Everyone is hunting for drinking water, a basic necessity. It becomes precious, and some people with good business ideas grow very rich from selling drinking water. They have bought water sources that they now guard with an army of soldiers. A war is looming over access to food, water, and clean air. Norway and other countries with these essential resources find themselves needing to defend the water and clean air with soldiers. The world becomes more unpleasant, poorer in untouched nature. There will be new wars and conflicts based on the struggle for drinking water, food, and clean air.

(NEG 277/160)

The story of future drinking water as a precious commodity is also a story about capitalism, the dominant economic system of our time, in which a select few control the means of production, such as land, labour, and capital, to generate profit. The respondent reimagines the hegemonic narrative of capitalism to illustrate a future shaped by inequality and scarcity. In this vision, access to water becomes a symbol of extreme economic divides, and capitalism itself is portrayed as the antagonist in a global narrative of ecological degradation and social collapse, with both people and the planet depicted as its victims.

Another respondent also pictured a future where capitalism will destroy both the planet and our societies. Here, food was seen as an important tool to resist such societal collapse:

[I fear] that we will not manage to change the economic system and will continue overconsumption of resources. Greater social inequality within and between countries. Weak and corrupt leaders. Technological developments that make us less human and do not provide what we need. Loss of knowledge that we have accumulated over generations, knowledge about growing food, traditional crafts, and natural materials. I want time to live a sustainable life. For me, that means having time to cook from scratch with local/self-produced goods, time and knowledge to repair things and clothes that break. To make my own products. Quality time with family and friends.

(NEG 277/131)

The respondent described a future in which the current economic system drives increased socio-economic disparities and unwanted technological development, resulting in the loss of essential knowledge about food production. In this story, we consume only the food the system allows us to access, having lost our ability to produce our own. However, the story also offers a tangible solution to counter this trajectory: dedicating more time to food production and home cooking, which, as we will show in the next section, is a desired future for many.

Nature and community

In many of the respondents' stories about the future, themes such as social relationships, community, our relationship with nature, frugal living, and local traditions were repeatedly highlighted as core values and closely linked to the performance of food-related practices. The stories often emphasised simpler and more sustainable ways of living, where self-sufficiency in food production and strong communal bonds were regarded as foundational. For example, cultivating food in small gardens or urban gardens was not described as a lifestyle choice, but rather as a necessity, presented as a plausible response to climate challenges and increasing resource insecurity. One respondent wrote about this as follows:

People are growing more of their own food at home, in gardens, and balcony boxes. More people have gardens with wildflowers or meadows to preserve insect life. More have solar panels. We have had to reduce our standard of living in the West, but that is not a negative thing. We save more water. Emissions and rising temperatures are increasing, leading to even more migration because some areas become uninhabitable due to the heat. This will also lead to more poverty because it becomes impossible to grow food in those areas. We must avoid further destruction of nature; instead, we must plant more trees and learn from ancient irrigation systems. I would like to live more simply. Preferably in a more rural way, with the possibility of growing a bit of food in a small garden.

(NEG 277/132)

In this story, a stronger bond with nature was presented as an adaptive strategy to the effects of climate change. While the respondent hopes for a better and more harmonious future, the story simultaneously expresses concern about the consequences of contemporary overconsumption. It suggests a more frugal lifestyle as an alternative mode of living that could slow down the destruction of nature. We find the virtue of frugality in many of the stories, such as reduced meat consumption, less travelling, and buying fewer clothes.

Frugality is also described as being enacted within a community, which serves as an opposite to the individualist lifestyle promoted by capitalism. The frugal lifestyle is about disconnecting from the mass consumption system of capitalism and reconnecting with both nature and the community. For the respondents, reconnecting with nature means experiencing and utilising the resources that nature provides without harming it. The most frequently cited example is growing our own food, which also represents direct bodily contact with nature. Food production, in this context, is however not merely portrayed as a practical solution to meet climate challenges, it is also described as a socially enriching practice that fosters relationships, local communities, neighbourhoods, and friendships – a shared sense of purpose and meaning in the world. One of the respondents writes about a frugal lifestyle, using the word 'dugnadsånd', which is a Norwegian word for organised voluntary work in a community:³

I want to live like many did on the Norwegian countryside in the post WWII era, with faith in the future, 'dugnadsånd' and a will to contribute [...] I will gladly let go of today's material standards in exchange for more locally and self-produced food and clothing. I would not have to travel far [...] I could live in a simple manner in a small community, as long as it was functional, aesthetic, and practical. I would work with something that had instant value.

(NEG 277/004)

Although most believe that we are far from achieving a frugal community lifestyle, the idea of living in a community based on dugnad is a key symbol of Norwegian culture, and it may also be a symbol of freedom. The frugal community is further explored in this respondent's story:

I believe we need to return to a society where as many people as possible can grow food on a small scale. Communities should function as small units with many local businesses that produce what people in the area need. And wages shouldn't have to be enormous, but rather correspond to the available resources. Everyone should have their basic needs met, and that is more important than having everything in excess. Happiness lies in creating security and contributing to good lives for everyone, not in owning more and more things. We are seeing the introduction of digital learning platforms in schools and the destruction of nature. And also war. That we are still unable to resolve conflicts through dialogue and continue to resort to bombing is deeply tragic. We must invest tremendous energy and knowledge into peace! It should be a subject in school from the first grade – how to communicate with each other in a way that doesn't trigger division but allows us to explore different perspectives in mutual respect. Billions are spent on war, yet almost nothing is spent on peace! This must change on every level of society.

(NEG 277/133)

This story underscores the interconnectedness of local food production with broader societal benefits such as safety, peaceful coexistence, and mutual respect. It also expresses a longing for a return to a more caring and grounded mode of life.

In sum, we find that living in small local communities where inhabitants collectively produce and consume food can be seen as a counter-reaction to the pressures and challenges of globalisation. The desire to turn toward the familiar and the local can be a response to the feeling of loss of control when facing major global issues. When democratic structures weaken, when we experience the effects of climate change in our backyard, and when we see political unrest and war, we feel powerless. We find that many of the stories are about seeking security in what people can influence directly, such as growing their food, fostering social relationships through communal living and reconnecting with nature by utilising its resources. As such, local food production and consumption might serve to regain control. The regional and the immediate thus become both a refuge and a form of resistance, a way to cope with the overwhelming complexity in today's world.

Making imaginaries tangible through design

In the IMAGINE project we collaborated with designers and artists to make imaginaries of the future more tangible and accessible for critical discussion.⁴ By translating abstract ideas into tangible forms and experiences, the project aimed to create a space for public engagement with imaginings of the future. Food and eating, one of the three key topics in IMAGINE, was, of course, also a key topic in many of the student projects, with participants using food-related practices such as growing, preparing, sharing, and consuming food as a lens to explore and express their collective hopes and fears for the future. These practices served not only as metaphors but also as experiential entry points into broader conversations about how we live, what we value, and how we imagine change. Below, we highlight three standout student projects that demonstrate how food can carry layered imaginaries of both societal collapse and communal resilience in the face of uncertainty. These projects show how speculative futures can become tools for critical reflection when embodied through *provotypes* – prototypes deliberately designed to provoke thought, raise questions, and challenge assumptions rather than offer finished solutions.

The Foraging Project – by Daan Meylemans

The Foraging Project envisions a scarcity-driven world in which meat has become a luxury, reserved for the few, forcing the majority to survive on foraged plant foods. To test this scenario, Meylemans organised workshops in the forests surrounding Norway's capital, Oslo, observing both fellow students' reactions to foraged dishes and their ability to gather sufficient resources. The images below (in Figure 12.1) show variations of meals he composed from what he could find, along with the sources from which he drew them.

Meylemans found that identifying, harvesting, and processing wild foods presented a steep learning curve that most participants found overwhelming without strong motivation, suggesting that foraging remains impractical except under extreme necessity. Although a well-planned foraged diet may, in theory, be able to meet basic nutrient needs, workshop attendees were sceptical as to whether wild foods would provide sufficient vitamins, proteins, and calories. Moreover, the time and labour required to collect, prepare, and preserve these foods far exceed those demanded by conventional purchasing, implying a fundamental restructuring of daily food practices if foraging were to become the norm. Finally, the absence of standardised quality controls in the wild poses a serious health risk, reinforcing why foraging persists primarily as a recreational activity rather than a means to meet daily dietary needs.

Meylemans concludes that, while widespread foraging is unlikely to replace industrial food systems under ordinary conditions, cultivating foraging skills could improve societal resilience in times of crisis. He further argues that reducing meat consumption, whether through necessity or choice, would lower the disease burden associated with livestock, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and challenge the



Pine Needle Tea



Stinging Nettle Soup



Sea Salt



Pine Needles



Stinging Nettle



Oslo Fjord Sea Water



Rose Hip Jam



Mizuna Root



Chickweed Salad

Figure 12.1 The Foraging Project.

Meals made from wild food the artist gathered. Source: Photos by Daan Meylemans – IMAGINE project.

economic power of the global meat industry. In doing so, his project invites us to consider not only what survival strategies might look like under environmental pressure but also how our cultural values around food could shift in response to scarcity and sustainability requirements. Furthermore, the project somewhat deromanticises the idea of self-sufficiency and living off the land by highlighting the physical, social, and ecological constraints of such a lifestyle. Foraging demands knowledge, time, and a healthy ecosystem, resources that are unevenly distributed and often compromised in modern societies. By exposing the work-intensive and uncertain nature of subsistence practices, Meylemans prompts a more grounded reflection on what it truly means to ‘live with nature’, and whether such ideals can be realistically scaled or sustained in a world shaped by climate change, urbanisation, and socio-economic inequality.

Bone Appétit – by Natalia de Luna

The Bone Appétit project (see Figure 12.2) takes audiences into an imagined 2050, a world in which the climate crisis has destroyed the global food system. With agricultural yields severely impacted and extreme food scarcity looming, governments have adopted radical measures to preserve supplies. Norway, in this speculative future, proclaims a pioneering zero-waste food mandate, yet this conceals uncomfortable truths about differences in how food is sourced and shared. As viewers engage with the provotype, a film, they uncover the irony of the mandate: many of the ‘eco-friendly’ products on Norwegian shelves are in fact imports from countries such as Brazil and Haiti, places already suffering from food scarcity. By exposing our dependency on the Global South, the film highlights how the heaviest toll of the climate crisis falls on those who have contributed least to its causes. What appears as responsible leadership in affluent nations merely enables a system of extraction from poorer regions.

Bone Appétit reminds us that the dystopia it depicts for wealthy societies mirrors the everyday reality for millions in the Global South. Wealthier states may protect their populations through policy innovations, but vulnerable communities have long endured food insecurity from inequitable global trade and environmental injustice. Visually, the work employs advertising-style cinematography to create a dissonant effect: the glossy presentation clashes with the unsettling content, urging audiences to question the marketing narratives that often hide exploitative practices



Figure 12.2 Bone Appétit.

Picture of the Bone Appétit stand where videofilm was projected. Source: Photo by Alexander Mertsch – IMAGINE project.

in the language of sustainability. In doing so, the project asks fundamental questions: who truly benefits from a zero-waste paradigm, and can such policies ever solve societal injustices? By confronting us with this scenario, Bone Appétit insists on a re-examination of our assumptions about fairness, survival, and what it really means to build a just food system under the pressures of a changing climate.

The Garden of Eden – by Julianne Pheng

Oslo has Norway's most excellent density of food stores reachable within a ten-minute journey, but imagine those options reduced to just two centralised grocery hubs. One such facility, The Garden of Eden (see Figure 12.3), is a climate-resilient grocery hub, its core protected by an underground greenhouse designed to withstand extreme environmental disasters that might disrupt traditional agriculture. An AI-driven model underpins the operation by recommending a tiered membership structure as the most 'efficient' way to reduce food waste. Yet, this efficiency comes with a steep social price.

In this provotype, food availability aligns strictly with individual needs and a membership level. Basic foods, like onions, are stocked for every member, reflecting their universal culinary use. More specialised items, such as mangoes, are reserved for the top level, whose higher subscription fee reflects their greater purchasing power. By structuring access around essential versus optional or desired foods, The Garden of Eden both safeguards scarce resources and reinforces the



Figure 12.3 The Garden of Eden.

Picture of a lush and bountiful underground garden. Source: The Garden of Eden project by Julianne Pheng exhibited at The House of Literature in Oslo 2024. Photo: Alexander Mertsch.

principle that you receive only what your membership permits and your needs justify.

Membership levels correspond to income brackets. The top level is 'Platinum', granting subscribers exclusive access to rare and exotic produce and premium foods with short lifespans, including freshly baked breads, meats, and seafood. This elite selection is secured behind a locked upper floor, accessible only by scanning a member-specific QR code or embedded chip. By contrast, the 'Bronze' level affords those with more modest means a supply of basic fruits and vegetables, while premium items remain available only in frozen form. As incomes rise into the 'Silver' and 'Gold' brackets, members retain access to all lower-tier offerings, but only Gold and Platinum members may use the facility's upper levels.

The Garden of Eden was designed as a metaphor for the American healthcare system, translating the challenge of unequal access into the production and consumption of food. Through its interactive interface, the provotype shows how essential resources and benefits shift according to socio-economic status, echoing the real-world divide in the uneven distribution of both food and healthcare. By grounding these complexities in our most fundamental need, what we eat, The Garden of Eden invites users to experience the consequences of social inequalities already woven into our societies.

Conclusion

The stories and provotypes provide us with written and visual representations of imaginaries of the future, and demonstrate how food, a fundamental human need, serves as a powerful symbol for imagining future societies. The analysis shows that food functions as a lens through which we can understand, critique, and articulate our hopes and fears for the future. As both product and practice, food offers a tangible way to personalise and engage with complex global challenges. By bringing abstract issues such as the climate crisis or economic inequality into an everyday life context, these food-based narratives and provotypes make distant, systemic concerns more concrete, relatable, and emotionally resonant.

The analysis shows that food can be used to exemplify the effects of capitalism. The loss of fertile land, erosion of food traditions, and the struggle for access to basic resources such as food and water are clear examples of how the consequences of an unsustainable economic system manifest in everyday life. At the same time, food also symbolises hope and resistance. Through themes such as self-sufficiency, growing our own food and community-based living, the stories and provotypes also show a longing for more sustainable ways of life. In this context, food production and consumption are not merely practical necessities; they represent practices that foster reconnection with nature and strengthen social bonds.

Descriptions of food in the future is an expression of a desire to reclaim control, reduce our dependence on global systems, and develop a more just and meaningful way of life. In the stories and provotypes, food carries a dual meaning: it mirrors current and future challenges of overconsumption, socioeconomic differences and

the consequences of climate change, at the same time offering a roadmap to a future built on community, strong bonds with nature, and sustainable values.

Notes

- 1 More information can be found on the IMAGINE project website: <https://imagine.oslomet.no/the-project/>
- 2 The questionnaire can be found on the Minner webpage: <https://minner.no/tema/fremtidstanker>
- 3 Dugnadsånd is also Norway's national word and a key symbol of Norwegian culture.
- 4 All the student projects referred to in this chapter are on view at the IMAGINE exhibition website: <https://imagine.oslomet.no/exhibition/>

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13 Semi-fictional narratives and images

Inspiring socio-ecological transition through art-based methods

Virginie Amilien and Gun Roos

Introduction¹

Once upon a time, two researchers set out to present a qualitative study on food acquisition and consumption in a Norwegian book on food practices, food culture, and sustainability. Having conducted fieldwork on the diverse ways Norwegians acquire food – through activities such as shopping in stores, exchanging with neighbours, cultivating gardens, and other practices – the researchers uncovered that the seemingly routine nature of food acquisition concealed an intriguing complexity. This added complexity not only disrupted habitual decision-making but also highlighted the moral and practical tensions between established practices and the desire for change. Motivated by these findings, the researchers sought to stimulate critical reflection by sharing both their observations and the questions raised by their informants. They aimed to inspire readers to reconsider their consumption habits and to explore more sustainable and inclusive approaches to food systems. By creating a space where individual experiences and scholarly insights could converge, they hoped to offer a richer and more nuanced understanding of the evolving dynamics of food acquisition.

The researchers recognised that, in the Anthropocene era – a new epoch defined by humanity’s profound and often destructive impact on the planet, including the very ecosystems that sustain food production – reaching a wide audience is more urgent than ever. To contribute to the socio-ecological transition toward sustainable food consumption, they sought to ensure that their chapter was not only grounded in scientific analysis but also accessible to a broader public. By bridging academic rigour with broader communication, their goal was to inspire critical engagement and foster meaningful change in consumption practices. A few months after having written the chapter ‘Forskningseksperiment med semifiktive fortellinger og bilder – om anskaffelse av mat i Norge i dag’ [Research Experiment with Semi-Fictive Narratives and Images – on Food Acquisition in Norway today] (Amilien & Roos, 2025, online prepublication), they decided to tell more about this ‘story’ and the scientific rationale it was built on – mainly Ricœur’s work on fiction, narrative identity, and the imaginary, as well as arts-based research (ABR).

This is the reason why we decided to close this book with a chapter that revisits the same Strength2Food ethnographic fieldwork presented in Part 1, but from a novel perspective. The research question, this time, focuses on how the

communication of research findings using art-based methods might contribute to transforming consumption practices and attitudes, and how it facilitates the communication of research results. In this chapter, we aim to explore, question, and highlight the potential of narrative and visual storytelling as a tool for socio-ecological transition. The hypothesis is based on the impact of the poetic. As Abel puts it: ‘If poetics aims to change the world, it can only do so because the specific expectations of the text and its world disrupt, suspend, and reorient the reader’s prior expectations, thereby allowing the reader to shift into a new world’². (Abel, 1996, p. 89).

Following ‘mimesis’ in Ricœur’s framework (see Chapter 1, p.24), we begin with examples of semi-fictional narratives and visual images, as the stages of ‘configuration,’ ‘refiguration’ and ‘reading’ shape interaction with the reader (you). As Ricœur puts it:

The complete event is not only that someone speaks and addresses an interlocutor, but also that they aspire to bring into language and share with others a new *experience*. It is this experience that, in turn, has the world as its horizon.³

(Ricœur, 1983, p. 147)

By confronting our readers with imaginary worlds, we aim to broaden their horizons and invite them to use an innovative tool for a greener transition.

Given the desire to actively engage the reader (and a wider readership), we decided to reorganise the conventional structure of academic chapters. Thus this chapter starts with the results to capture interest. The content remains the same, but the form has shifted. The difference between a stew and a stir-fry is a metaphor of a culinary transformation, which seems here appropriate. In a stew, ingredients simmer together in a homogeneous blend; in a stir-fry, each element retains its distinct identity while contributing to a flavourful whole. Similarly, this chapter and experimental chapter builds on the aim to highlight individual components while presenting a coherent narrative.

This chapter begins with results, presented via narratives, visual images, and food biographies / photo collages (see Figures 13.1, 13.2, and 13.3), so that the reader can later form a concrete picture of the method. Then, in the second part, we present the contextual framework in which narrative and art-based research are central. In the third part, theoretical and methodological considerations, including the methodology and details about the data material, are provided. Finally, a discussion of the results and reflections on experimental arts-based research in the food field will pave the way for a conclusion.

Narrative 1 – picture 1⁴

It’s so cramped here. I can’t breathe anymore. When I arrived here, about ten years ago, there were two of us: me, the green one, and the blue one. Each of us proud of our own brand. But we cooperated easily, got along well, had enough

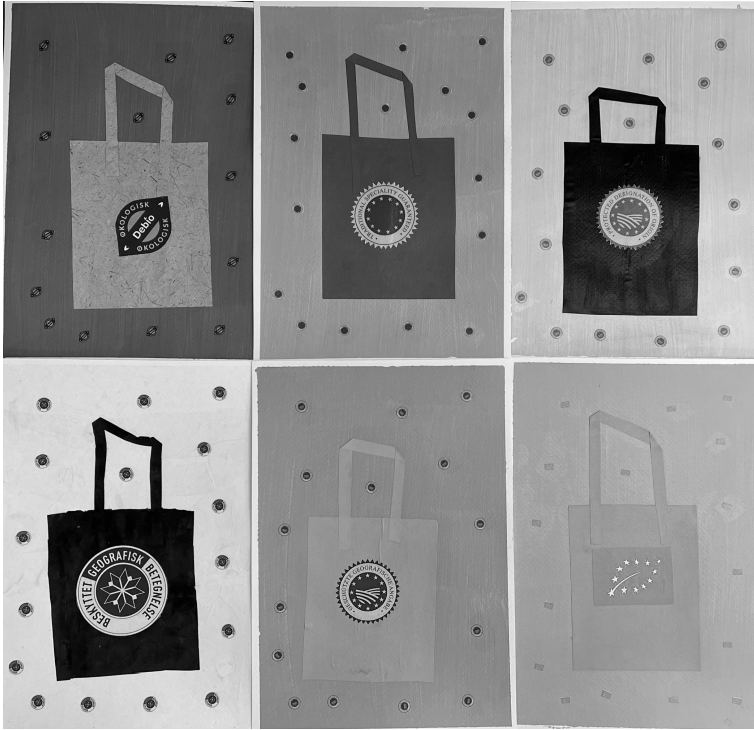


Figure 13.1 - 'Reusable shopping bags' – Own painting with collage.

The picture represents six shopping bags painted in Andy Warhol style. Source: Own illustration by Gun Roos

space, and life together was simple. But the blue one failed two years ago. Failed in the literal sense of the word: broke apart, collapsed. It happens to the best of us. I never saw him again. But a new blue one showed up immediately. Not of the same type... not as pleasant. After that, there were more frequent replacements. Now, there must be thirty of us. I don't know why we are so many. Are we forgotten by Jan and Terese, or are they pressured to buy new ones? I heard Jan say that he was aware of the marketing issue behind the shopping bag market and that they had to limit themselves, especially since he had read a research report stating that there were more than 27.5 million shopping bags in Norway.⁵ That makes quite a few per household....

However, there is no doubt that a reusable shopping bag is more durable than a plastic bag. Even compared to a paper bag. There's well no doubt about that.

But Jan and Terese have many doubts about plastic packaging. They never agree on that. Jan tends to buy organic vegetables, and they are always wrapped in plastic; according to him, it's normal because otherwise, they

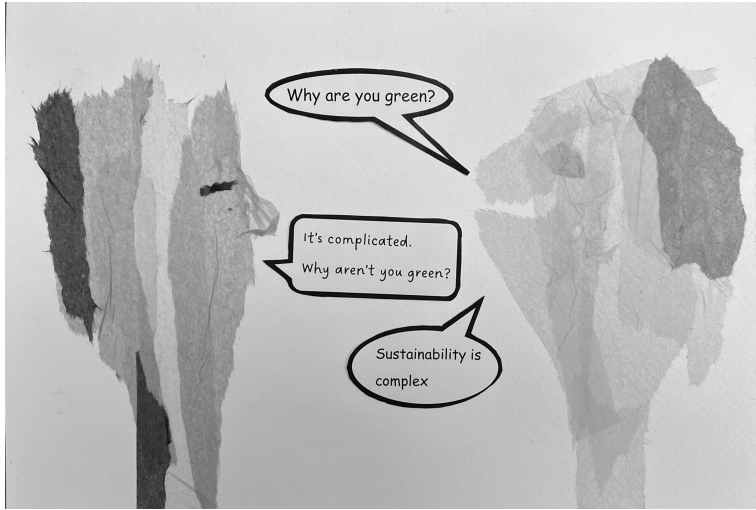


Figure 13.2 ‘Talking heads’ – Own painting with collage.

The picture represents two plastic bags, one green and one orange, speaking to each other. Source: Own illustration by Gun Roos

touch conventional vegetables, which are full of chemicals, so they must be separated somehow. But Terese finds it completely absurd; she thinks it’s absurd to buy something organic and throw away ten times more plastic than if you buy conventional products. It’s a discussion they often have at home. And it amuses me; it amuses me to hear them argue, questioning whether plastics are really well recycled or not. It amuses me because I don’t have that kind of problem in life. But I have others, and to be honest I don’t particularly like plastic packaging, especially those that look like boxes and are as hard as wood: they dig into my sides and are uncomfortable.

There’s a lot of difference between one shopping bag and another. I’m a specialist in heavy and large purchases, and one of the strongest. I have a very good friend, the red one, who is practically only used for fresh vegetables and fruit. Eggs. Fragile things. And then the little white one... it’s cool. Easy to slip into the pocket. More suitable for small, spontaneous purchases. But I’m the favorite: I’ve been repaired at least 30 times, and I’m still here. The ‘good old green one,’ they say, the one you can always rely on.

It’s crazy all that has been between my handles. In ten years, I’ve carried thousands of liters of milk, hundreds of kilos of flour, dozens of cans, frozen or fresh products, not to mention detergent and shampoo. That’s what Jan and Terese call the ‘basic assortment.’ As for other items like spreads and sour cream, the shopping list is on the table, and they write it down when something runs out. Such lists often stay with me for a long time, like an old memory from a previous time. For a while, they tried to plan weekly menus. The idea was to simplify daily life and shop big, but they found it so boring that it only lasted a few weeks.



Figure 13.3 'Plastic carrots' – Own painting with collage.

The picture represents carrots made of transparent plastic. Source: Own illustration by Gun Roos

Things have also changed a lot in 10 years. When the children were small, Jan and Terese regularly went to the big supermarket, by car, two or three times a month. Then there were shopping trips to Sweden a couple of times a year. I really liked that era. The children sitting on the cart, the parents pushing through the aisles, the children asking for chocolate, the parents trying to find a compromise, the shopping cart filling up... and I watched, enjoyed, and thought about the big world. I was calm and observant until the checkout. Then it was my turn to act, up to me to make myself available to contain as many products as possible. Sometimes up to 20 kg. My great pride. It was my big outing. After this, Jan or Terese went alone to the store, picking up products here and there, out of habit, without discussion or thought. They had a fixed weekly list and followed it slavishly. I had to concentrate all the way because they filled me involuntarily as they shopped. But since last year, there has been a big change: bulk purchases are ordered online and delivered home in large boxes. I thought I would become unemployed, but no: Just a matter of retraining.

And the children aren't home much anymore. Big shopping trips are rarer, and Jan and Terese mainly go to the nearest store. Often a bit spontaneously, here or there, after work. In smaller portions. Smaller and smaller, sometimes 1 liter of milk, a piece of cheese, some flour, and 'some ready-made dinners.' Sometimes, during a break at work, they take a small bag in their pocket.

The other day, the new Blue one came back with a terrible smell of fresh fish that had leaked. The whole drawer smelled of old fish for 2 days until Jan washed it. But like most Norwegians, fortunately, they don't eat much fresh fish but mainly prawns, gravlax, fermented trout, mackerel in tomato.... Fortunately, tins seldom leak.

What I really don't like is oil. Once a plastic oil bottle leaked... and afterwards, I was greasy for several days before anyone noticed it. But since he watched a documentary about cooking oil, Jan only buys rapeseed and olive oil. Moreover, Terese insists that it has to be organic, in glass bottles, and slightly more expensive, preferably with a protected designation, so they are pretty careful with them nonetheless.

The new thing is that sometimes I go on outdoor trips. Jan takes me biking when he goes searching for mushrooms or berries in the forest, especially blueberries or lingonberries. It reminds me of when I was a tourist in Sweden (when we went 'border shopping' because of the price, but cosier; less stress). Just peace and joy. Terese has a friend who has chickens. She often walks there to fetch eggs, But I never went there; it was the red one who told me about it. I love the shared moments in the evening, where all the shopping bags, gathered again in the drawer, passionately recount their experiences of the day to each other.

Narrative 2 – images 2 and 3⁶

I perceive a growing clarity. The world is lighting up. In my opinion, within three bird calls – yes, I measure time by the 'pip pip' of those crazy birds outside – the customers will appear. (Humans use clocks to measure time, but I don't have any.) I listen to the crazy birds – You'd have to be a little crazy to have wings and live in a store, wouldn't you? – And with every new scratch on the shelf opposite me (I measure short time by bird calls, but long time by the scratches I see accumulating), I hope for change. Everyone has their markers.

Well... I like these moments of awakening. I dream of an adventure. A new time. A chance to question my purpose. I cherish these moments of reflection, where existing scratches, self on my shelf, and the world intertwine, making me feel truly alive.

About me? Well, I look good. Everyone says so. Smooth, shiny, and, let's be honest, indestructible. Because I last therefore, I am lasting. Almost eternal. And therein lies the paradox of durability, a topic I often discuss with PapBag, my neighbor. I like PapBag, despite his unshakable pride. He used

to tell, and re-tell, he was born from a tree, transformed into fibers, pressed, dried, and finally shaped to carry human groceries. He is wrinkled, but happy and proud. And he thinks I'm arrogant. Well, I'm just perfect. I can't help it. But I didn't choose my form or my material. It's my DNA. Or it is just destiny, if you prefer.

We talk a lot about sustainability. But it's not by listening to customers that we've formed our opinions. No, we had a chat with AI who explained everything about sustainability and food consumption. It's complicated. A trendy word, this elusive concept. Some customers talk about it as if they know what it means; but I hear them, I watch their hands, I feel their eyes, and I see their confusion. They want to make good choices, not to make things worse, but they also have their routines and they want convenience. They like local food products, but they love mangos from Pakistan and avocados from Chile. They want to reduce waste, but they throw away stale bread and they have to buy organic cucumbers in plastic. And we, the packaging, are – following them – at the heart of their dilemmas.

I agree we are a visible dilemma. Much more visible than pesticides, chemicals or environmental issues due to Norwegian salmon production. (I heard this guy last week who was so angry about pollution from salmon farms. He discusses with a woman during, at least, thirty bird calls.) We are tangible, part of material reality. Many customers prefer to choose one of PapBag's cousins because they are biodegradable and will return to the earth to nourish the soil, but others will definitely take one of my plastic friends because we're stronger. Yet PapBag has his flaws. To make him, trees must be cut down. And he tears, breaks, leaks, and quickly ends up in the trash. If he's dirty, he can't even be recycled. Me? I last! I endure; therefore, I ensure. However, after numerous discussions with PapBag, I wonder: Is it truly a virtue to remain intact for centuries, floating in oceans or piling up in landfills?

As a plastic package, I have my arguments. I'm lightweight and durable (funnily enough, durable means sustainable in French), and I protect food better than paper. Thanks to me, organic cucumbers stay fresher, and strawberries remain fresh for longer. I even shield organic and responsibly grown foods from the chemicals and pesticides found in conventional production. But at what cost? They say I'm recyclable. But how often am I actually recycled? To do so I need to be appropriately handled, reused, not abandoned anywhere. And let's be honest, humans aren't always up to the task. Most of the time, we end up where we shouldn't be, causing damage I can't even imagine.

But maybe the problem isn't us, the packaging. Perhaps the real issue is humans' obsession with convenience. They want everything immediately, with no effort. They want organic products, but they also want them to be beautiful, perfect, and available year-round. They want to save the planet, but they don't want to change their habits.

So, what's the solution? Personally, I don't think durability is about choosing between plastic and paper. It's a question of compromise, of priorities.

PapBag, AI, and I have discussed it extensively, and we have heard so many customers chatting as they walked by. There's no escaping it: humans need to learn to consume differently. To buy less, to reuse more, and to value what they already have. They need to understand that, even if the stakeholders are in no hurry to change a system – in which they apparently feel comfortable – every choice has consequences. I also understood that perfection doesn't exist. This also applies to me. I am not so perfect at the end. And by the way, who am I, a mere plastic package, to pass judgment on durability?

For now, I remain here, on this shelf, reflecting on my condition. And I'll keep doing what I do best: carrying groceries, being strong, holding up. That's life.

And perhaps one day, humans will realise that durability isn't just about packaging or materials. It's a way of thinking, of living. And perhaps then, PapBag, AI, and we will finally find our place in this complex world.

Food biographies – collage with participants' photos



Figure 13.4 Alternative Food Procurement in one of the participating households.

The picture represents food (meat, fish and vegetables) that the household obtained or grew themselves. Source: Strength2Food material – curated by researcher



Figure 13.5 Shopping Bag Biography.

The picture represents different types of plastic bags and shopping bags from the fieldwork's households. Source: Strength2Food material – curated by researcher

Mimesis – about the narrative turn as a conceptual approach of socio-ecological transition

In the book *The Science of Discworld*, the authors introduce the concept of 'Pan narrans' to emphasise the significance of storytelling in human nature (Pratchett et al., 2002). 'Pan narrans' evokes the image of the storytelling ape, contrasting with the term 'Homo sapiens,' which describes the wise man. The authors particularly highlight that the ability to tell stories is a central characteristic of humanity. Narratives are thus foundational and constitutive of human understanding of the world.

Rolf Jensen further explores this idea in *The Dream Society*, a work with the telling subtitle: *How the Coming Shift from Information to Imagination Will Transform Your Business* (Jensen, 1999). Diverging from Ricœur's theoretical approach presented here, Jensen adopts a pragmatic perspective on the use of storytelling, with a focus on the commercial realm. He describes what we would term the 'narrative turn,' namely the transformation of a society dominated by information (as forecast by Daniel Bell (Bell, 1973) a generation earlier) into one

where imagination, emotion, and storytelling play a decisive role in reinventing the consumer experience.⁷ Thus, his work pragmatically underscores the analyses developed by Ricœur, highlighting the power of narratives and storytelling in transforming consumer behaviour.

Our hypothesis regarding the potential of arts-based research, particularly storytelling through words and images, is strongly rooted in the concept of mimesis as a catalyst for thought and a transformative force in understanding the world. We would use here the words of Olivier Abel on mimesis, writing about and quoting Ricœur:

Poetic mimesis, unlike rhetorical argumentation which adapts to the presuppositions of its audience, aims no less than to reshape and overturn these presuppositions, this prefiguration: ‘The conversion of the imaginary is the central aim of poetics. Through it, poetics disrupts the sedimented universe of accepted ideas, the premises of rhetorical argumentation. This same breakthrough of the imaginary simultaneously shakes the order of persuasion.’

(Abel, 1996, p. 89)⁸

Theoretical and methodological considerations

The approach adopted in this chapter is inspired by a triangulated framework that draws upon the theories of Bruno Latour and Paul Ricœur on the one hand, and ABR methodologies on the other.

Latour

‘Describe, write, describe, write,’ says Bruno Latour (the professor) to his PhD student in *How to Write a Sociology Dissertation: A Short Dialogue Between a Student and a Professor (Somewhat Socratic)* (Latour, 2004). According to Latour, the purpose is not merely to write in order to describe, but to write in order to understand – and thereby to describe more effectively. For Latour, narrative and fiction are important tools in presenting research, though storytelling is but one mode among many artistic forms – including theatre, painting, and music – that enable the communication of meaning beyond what words alone can express.

Latour’s thinking has influenced this chapter in at least two significant ways. First, through his reflections on the Anthropocene and Gaia in his eponymous book, where he combines non-textual materials with the notion of transforming the reader into a ‘co-researcher’ or ‘co-investigator.’ Second, through the collaborative project *Making Things Public*, which sought to revive the *res in res publica* by returning agency – *power* – to *things*. In both the large-scale exhibition and the accompanying 1,000-page volume, ‘things’ are foregrounded through a ‘politics of things’ grounded in an object-orientated democracy (Latour & Weibel, 2005).

A compelling image on Latour’s website features Franck Cochoy presenting what is likely an exhibition of cereal box packaging (Cochoy, 2024). Cochoy,

aligning with Latour's perspectives, has, for instance, written on packaging. In a recent tribute article to Latour, Cochoy highlights the concept of 'matters of concern' as a way to 'reconnect with the intimate and moral relationships we maintain – consciously or not – with objects.' This deeper, more-than-material value of objects is something we also seek to convey through the stories told in this chapter – both in the narratives and paintings, 'things' such as shopping bags and plastic packaging are the agents who tell us about their experiences, feelings, and thoughts in relationships with their environment – humans and non-humans.

Ricœur

Paul Ricœur views narrative as a pillar of identity formation, and imagination as a foundational element in our perception of reality, as presented in chapter 1. In *Temps et récit* [Time and Narrative] (Ricœur, 1984–1988), Ricœur underscores the significance of the fictional text through various complementary approaches, such as the human experience of time, mimesis, imagination (encompassing ethics, agency, and change), and narrative identity. The notion of temporality is central to his work, offering reflections from which fiction can be construed as imparting form and meaning to the reality of human experience through the passage of time.

While we initially emphasised narrative identity to highlight the importance of our informants' stories – and consequently their fragments, which are the quotations – here we will address Ricœurian perspectives that pertain more to fiction and imagination. Fiction, rooted in both reality and imagination, is considered here as a tool for engaging in critical reflection and subsequently taking action.

Let us first examine the representation of reality through fiction, revisited by the concept of mimesis, which appears fundamental in this context. By delineating three levels of mimesis (I, II, and III), Ricœur elucidates the process by which reality is first prefigured and transformed, then configured into a narrative, and finally refigured in the reader's experience (Ricœur, 1983, Part 3). This process of mimesis illustrates how narrative fiction structures and transforms our understanding of the world. Thus, for Ricœur, fiction is not merely an imitation of reality but a reconfiguration that enables us to comprehend and interpret the world anew.

Consequently, the fictional narrative, particularly through reconfiguration (mimesis III), opens up a realm of possibilities for the reader by transforming their perception of reality, allowing them to perceive the world differently, and stimulating the manner in which the reader constructs their identity. It is therefore a dynamic process that engages the reader in an interaction between themselves, the text, and the world: it is this interactive process that we aim to stimulate through two types of fiction: semi-fictional narratives and illustrations.

By enriching our understanding of the world, fiction provokes, according to Ricœur's hermeneutic vision, novel perspectives and opens up reflections on identity and personal values, as well as diverse moral choices. Small semi-fictional narratives, where the narrator is either human or non-human, aim to transform the lived reality of consumers/readers into a narrative (that creates, or even provokes, a distance that encourages a different perspective on everyday life) and stimulate

reflection on their own practices to encourage them to consider changes in their behaviour or choices. It is, in essence, a dialogue with the reader, whose objective is not solely to convey information but to facilitate co-reflection and interaction. As Ricœur puts it: ‘The narrative finds its meaning when it is restored to the time of action and suffering’⁹ (Ricœur, 1983, p. 136).

Through our semi-fictional narratives, we seek to provoke reflection and ignite the imagination of consumers, encouraging them to engage with the complexities surrounding the use of shopping bags, plastic packaging, and organic food in relation to sustainability. Our ultimate aim is to inspire curiosity and foster a deeper exploration of innovative pathways for living more sustainable lives.

Arts-based research

ABR represents a distinctive qualitative research methodology that incorporates artistic processes into both the exploration and dissemination of research findings. Over the past decade and a half, ABR has gained traction, particularly within the domains of health and education. In their influential work on ABR, Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (Barone & Eisner, 2012) contend that aesthetic and artistic principles can be interwoven into both data collection and dissemination. Their objective is to ‘enhance understanding through the communication of subjective realities or personal truths that can only be conveyed through artistic expression.’ Their exploration delves into the concept of fiction, posing critical questions: what constitutes fiction, and what does not? They propose that, given all cultural artefacts are human-made, they possess a fictional quality, reflecting the etymological roots of ‘fiction’ from the Latin ‘fictio,’ meaning ‘to form or shape.’ Consequently, a sociological study might be considered as ‘fictional’ as a folktale.

Patricia Leavy, in her work *Fiction as Research Practice* (Leavy, 2013), investigates fiction both as a source of data (such as novels and films) and as a medium for representing findings through ‘fictional narrative.’ She posits that academics are inherently storytellers – absorbing insights from others and conveying their learnings in creative, expressive, dynamic, and authentic manners.

In arts-based research, visual art plays a pivotal role in bridging the gap between empirical data and experiential understanding. These graphic forms serve as powerful tools for conveying complex ideas and emotions that might be difficult to articulate through words alone. By employing colour, texture, and composition, as well as references to existing work of art, illustrations invite readers or viewers to engage with the research findings on a more intuitive level. This sensory engagement allows for a deeper exploration of themes and narratives that emerge from the research. It transforms narratives, memories, or abstract concepts into tangible experiences, fostering a new approach.

In accordance with Ledger and McCaffrey (Ledger & McCaffrey, 2015), we advocate for the understanding of ABR as a versatile research strategy, particularly adept at probing complex subjects. In this study, ABR is utilised through two complementary modalities: food biographies and semi-fictional narratives. To transcend the limitations of textual communication, one of the researchers employed

painting with collage as a method to reflect upon and articulate the results through form, colour, and composition. For example, the image with reusable shopping bags (Figure 13.1) also articulates visibility and curiosity around labels. This approach underscores the potential of ABR to offer rich, multidimensional insights that engage both the intellect and the senses, facilitating a deeper connection with the research material.

Empirical foundation

This chapter is primarily based on qualitative fieldwork conducted within the *Strength2Food* project. One of the core objectives of the project was to explore how food quality labels – such as organic or protected designation certifications – figure in everyday food practices, particularly in the context of everyday food practices.

The fieldwork involved participant observation in the homes of six Norwegian households selected to represent a diversity of attitudes toward sustainable consumption, geographic locations, family compositions, and socio-economic backgrounds (as partly described in Chapters 2 and 4). Researchers visited each household three times over the course of a year, accompanying participants during food acquisition in supermarkets, grocery stores, farmers' markets, organic shops, and farm outlets.

The methodological approach was interventionist, combining observational techniques with dialogic engagement. This included both verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g., facial expressions, silences), and interactive elements between participants and researchers as well as between participants and food products. Initial visits included semi-structured interviews, while the final visits were framed as open, dialogical conversations. Importantly, the research was not conducted *on* households but *with* them, reflecting a participatory and collaborative ethos. The analysis is further informed by over 25 years of research experience in Norwegian food culture, consumption, and everyday practices.

We used NVivo software to organise and analyse the text, audio, and image data collected during our ethnographic fieldwork. The material was coded according to several thematic categories. One of the central codes was sustainable consumption, which included a range of nodes and sub-themes such as community-supported agriculture (CSA), local and organic food, and waste.

When revisiting this dataset during the writing of the present chapter – specifically to identify key themes for illustration – we observed that certain topics stood out prominently. These included waste, plastic use, local and organic food, and the inherent complexity of sustainable thinking. To validate our interpretation, we sought a second opinion by uploading our NVivo files into an OpenAI model, asking it to identify the three main themes emerging from our participants' reflections on sustainable everyday food consumption. The model identified plastic use, locally grown food, and sustainability as a complex overarching theme, which aligned with our earlier analysis. Based on this confirmation, we chose to focus on

the use – and misuse – of plastic as a material entry point, offering a tangible yet rich lens through which broader reflections on sustainability could emerge.

Empirically, the chapter draws on 17 interviews and accompanying field observations conducted in Norway as part of an ethnographic study of food consumers (see Chapters 2 and 4 for more details) as well as ‘food biographies’ (presented as photo-collages). It is important to note that the concept of *sustainable consumption* itself was rarely addressed as such during the fieldwork. However, the results presented focus on the themes, subjects, and discussions that the researchers consider to be more often expressed while speaking of sustainable food consumption: the plastic issue. We created, therefore, a first combination of text and image based on a monologue by a reusable bag, where the shopping bag image draws direct inspiration from Andy Warhol’s *Campbell’s Soup Can*, blending pop art aesthetics with contemporary consumer themes. The second combination presents reflections on plastic packaging, durability, paper bags, and human dilemmas.

On the art-based research experiment – a descriptive approach

As explained previously, to analyse, communicate, and reflect on the findings, the authors engaged in visual experimentation, combining semi-fictional narrative, visual images, and photo-collage. The aim is not to reproduce informants’ words verbatim here – a task fulfilled by the first sections of the book – but rather to produce semi-fictional narratives and visual representations that illustrate contemporary Norwegian food practices and justifications related to sustainable consumption.

Methodological framework: An arts-based approach to everyday food consumption

Semi-fictional narratives – first perspective

The research material was translated and reinterpreted using a literary approach. These narratives, grounded in empirical data, including direct quotations and observations, are reimagined through what the author terms ‘semi-fictional storytelling.’ As Lee Gutkind has noted, the goal of creative nonfiction is to let factual elements dissolve into a fictional form without compromising their truth: ‘The stories are true’ (Gutkind, 2012, p. 6).

The narratives reflect not only wordings, but also gestures, expressions, comments, things, and actions observed in the field, interpreted and composed into coherent stories. Alongside traditional ethnographic methods, visual elements such as painting and collage are incorporated, creating a dialogic and mutually inspiring relationship between narrative and image. For instance, the prominence of quality labels emerged as a theme largely due to images that underscored the ‘invisibility of the visible’ (as underlined in Chapter 4, a central finding of the Strength2Food project was that participating households showed limited engagement with food quality labels).

The two semi-fictional narratives serve as interpretive tools, enabling readers to understand better the social and cultural context of typical food-sustainability-related practices within Norwegian households.

Visual representations – second perspective

Art and visual media offer powerful means of expressing complex, often ineffable experiences. The images accompanying the semi-fictional narratives were created using mixed media and collage. These images draw from field notes, project results, narrative content, and artistic influences and thus aim to enhance the visibility and curiosity around labels, as well as question what sustainable food consumption is. Everyday items – as plastic packaging or shopping bags chosen here – serve as framing devices. The forest of words from the dialogue narrative is used to illustrate the complexity of the food system and the difficulty of making consequent, sustainable choices in everyday food practices, as underlined by informants.

Food biographies and photo collage – third perspective

As part of the Strength2Food project, participating households engaged with arts-based methods to document their everyday food practices through ‘food biographies.’ These comprised self-curated photographic series, some of which were featured in an online photo exhibition published on the project’s website.

During the initial field visit, participants were instructed to document their daily food-related activities – planning, purchasing, preparation, consumption, and waste management – using mobile devices. They were encouraged to focus particularly on products with quality labels. The documentation format and frequency were left open, although each household was asked to select 12 significant photos per theme at each of the 3 visits.

The first series depicted a week-long ‘family food biography.’ The second followed the ‘life story’ of a single food item. Before the third visit, households were explicitly asked to trace one or more quality-labelled item(s) through various consumption stages, documenting them via photos, notes, and videos where possible. The intent was to engage participants in constructing visual narratives that reveal deeper insights into their food consumption practices, particularly regarding engagement with (or disregard for) food quality labels.

The researchers used these visual materials to construct two collages. The first shows Alternative Food Procurement – curated by researcher, non-store-based food sourcing, including hunting, fishing, and home gardening in one of the participating households (see Figure 13.4). The second is a Shopping Bag Biography – curated by a researcher, showcasing the various shopping bags used by participants (see Figure 13.5).

Each photo collage explores a unique dimension of sustainable consumption, offering a textured view of how individuals and families interact with the material, symbolic, and ethical dimensions of food and what they mean sustainability is.

Towards a conclusion

In this chapter, we have introduced a research dissemination experiment with ABR methods to communicate findings from a qualitative project on food and quality labelling in everyday life. The aim of the experimental chapter was to explore how such methods can enrich the communication of food procurement practices in contemporary Norwegian households, and this chapter has aimed at contributing to transformation of consumption practices and attitudes by communicating research findings through arts-based dissemination.

First, ABR highlights the interpretive nature of all research. No matter how much time is spent in the field or how strong the rapport with participants is, there is always a layer of interpretation in how researchers translate observations and quotes into representations. Reproducing a gesture, a concept, a facial expression, or a glance is, inevitably, an act of interpretation.

Both the photo-based collages (constructed from participant images) and the narratives and images (derived from participant testimonies) are interpretive representations of everyday life. By combining textual and visual imagery – by weaving together the real and the imagined – we aimed for a more holistic and embodied understanding of food procurement.

Echoing Cheney in the proposition that ‘Creative [non-fiction] delivers facts in ways that move the reader toward a deeper understanding of a topic. Creative non-fiction requires the skills of the storyteller and the research ability of the conscientious reporters (Cheney, 2001, p. 1), we believe that creative nonfiction should employ literary techniques to convey factual material. Out of respect for our participants and the depth of what they shared with us, we used semi-fictional storytelling to create a degree of distance from specific individuals and contexts. Similarly, we employed illustration to move even further from participants’ exact words, expressions, and gestures, offering readers interpretive freedom to engage with the research on their own terms.

Second, inspired by Latour, we sought to foreground the perspectives of *things* rather than merely human actors. By personifying objects such as shopping bags and plastic packaging in the narratives and including images of things in their context, we emphasised the importance of things in sustainable consumption practices and in provoking socio-ecological change.

In this chapter, we have opted to employ arts-based methodology to depict representations of sustainable food consumption through semi-fictional narratives and visual compositions focusing on the role of shopping bags and plastic packaging – two of the main themes underlined by our informants. We would like to close this chapter with a quote about mimesis:

The work of mimesis is to increase our tolerance for uncertainty. Any modification of our world inevitably generates emotion and questioning: the dualization between what I believe and what the other (or even myself in another context) believes already makes truth a place of tension, a site of interrogativity[....] It is by more finely interspersing spaces of questioning within the

already accepted areas of information that we can reopen the desire for a more complex world. A poetic work problematizes the world in that it never answers the questions it raises without, in turn, summoning and provoking, through its very figurativity, other questions. It generates, or at least allows for the emergence of, other contexts, other horizons, and other points of view.¹⁰

(Abel, 1996, p. 96)

Whether the imagined world of these stories and images can spark new reflections or inspire fresh perspectives on food and sustainability is, as Ricœur might ask, a question only *you*, the reader, can answer. By sharing your insights with others, speaking about sustainable consumption, hearing others' meanings, and thinking further, because – as Latour stated during his artistic performance in Rome in 2020: 'An experiment only gains meaning if it can be debriefed.'¹¹

Notes

- 1 Acknowledgement: we would like to thank our colleagues Atle Wehn Hegnes, Henry Mainsah, and Raül Matta for fruitful comments. OpenAI has been used in this chapter for translation (from French or Norwegian to English) as well as a support tool for analysing data material as explained in the part about empirical foundation.
- 2 OpenAI translation of: 'Si la visée poétique est de changer le monde, elle ne peut le faire que parce que les attentes propres du texte et son monde viennent bouleverser, suspendre et réorienter les attentes préalables du lecteur, qui change ainsi de monde' (Abel 1996, p. 89).
- 3 OpenAI translation of: 'L'événement complet, c'est non seulement que quelqu'un prenne la parole et s'adresse à un interlocuteur, c'est aussi qu'il ambitionne de porter au langage et de partager avec autrui une *expérience* nouvelle. C'est cette expérience qui, à son tour, a le monde pour horizon' (Abel, 1996, p.147).
- 4 This semi-fictional narrative and image are slightly adapted from the experimental article in Norwegian – to be published in 2026.
- 5 Liv Bøyum and Hanna S. Tangen, 'Kartlegging bruk av handlenett,' *SIFO-rapport nr. 2-2024*. (SIFO – Bruk av handlenett gir meir miljøvennleg mathandel, 2024).
- 6 This semi-fictional narrative and image are made for this chapter, keeping the same theme but from another perspective.
- 7 A brief reflection on his perspective regarding consumers: Jensen means we are transitioning towards a society where stories, imagination, and emotions will play a central role: *The Dream Society* – as the prevalence of knowledge and technical efficiency are no longer perceived as salvific. In terms of consumption, he advocates that consumer decisions regarding the purchase of a given product will be more influenced by narratives and emotions than by the product's inherent qualities. Among other predictions, he foresees the emergence of the 'market of belonging,' where brands craft stories that foster a sense of belonging to a community.
- 8 OpenAI translation of: 'c'est que la mimésis poétique, à la différence de l'argumentation rhétorique qui s'adapte aux présuppositions de son auditoire, ne vise pas moins qu'à remanier et à bouleverser ces présupposés, cette préfiguration: "La conversion de l'imaginaire, voilà la visée centrale de la poétique. Par elle, la poétique fait bouger l'univers sédimenté des idées admises, prémisses de l'argumentation rhétorique. Cette même percée de l'imaginaire ébranle en même temps l'ordre de la persuasion". Ricœur quoted by O. Abel: 'Rhétorique, poétique, herméneutique,' in *De la métaphysique à la*

- rhétorique. *A la mémoire de Chaïm Perelman*, edited by Michel Meyer (Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1990), in Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures 2* (Paris: Seuil, 1992, p. 487).
- 9 OpenAI translation of: 'le récit a son sens lorsqu'il est restitué au temps de l'agir et du pâtir.' P. Ricoeur, (1983). *Temps et récit – l'intrigue et le récit historique* (Vol. 1), (Editions du Seuil. p. 136).
 - 10 OpenAI translation of: 'L'œuvre de la mimésis est d'augmenter notre tolérance au trouble. Toute modification de notre monde engendre certes une émotion et une interrogation: déjà la dualisation entre ce que je crois et ce que l'autre (ou moi-même en un autre contexte) croit, fait de la vérité un lieu tensif, la place d'une interrogativité[...] C'est alors en intercalant plus finement des plages d'interrogation dans les plages d'informations déjà admises que l'on peut rouvrir le désir d'un monde plus complexe. Une œuvre poétique problématise le monde, en ce qu'elle ne répond jamais aux questions dont elle est la relève sans convoquer et soulever à son tour, dans sa figurativité même, d'autres questions. Elle engendre ou du moins permet l'apparition d'autres contextes, d'autres horizons, et d'autres points de vue.' O. Abel (1996), 'La problématisation du monde et la mimésis de Paul Ricoeur.' In C. Hoogaert (Ed.), *Argumentation et questionnement* (pp. 79–98) (PUF). <https://www.olivierabel.fr/2022/09/11/la-problematisation-du-monde-et-la-mimesis-de-paul-ricoeur/> p. 95.
 - 11 Our translation: 'Une expérience n'a de sens que si on peut la débriefer.' Bruno Latour, *Art et Anthropocène // Performance de Bruno Latour à la Villa Médicis le 23 octobre 2020*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPfTFLpmwjg> (40th minute).

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Speaking words of wisdom? Reflections on ‘let eat be’

Matthew Gorton and Barbara Tocco

The Strength2Food project, which we had the good fortune to coordinate, addressed how European consumers perceive, value, trust, and utilise EU, national, and regional food quality labels. Through pan-European ethnographic research coordinated by the Consumption Research Norway (SIFO) team at OsloMet, the project indirectly tackled, however, a much more ambitious goal – to understand how households negotiate sustainability challenges in their everyday food practices. At first glance, the subject matter may appear dull (i.e., households’ food planning, purchasing, cooking, eating, and disposing). Yet, the work illuminates precisely because these mundane practices are usually overlooked and forgotten in policy and academic debates on sustainability. The disconnect between academic and policy discourses and how sustainability challenges are lived, experienced, and brought to life within households is, as demonstrated in this book, a structural critique that inhibits critical reflection, dialogue, and collective behaviour change.

In this conclusion, we reflect on the evolving societal and environmental challenges facing Europe, largely caused by (unsustainable) food consumption patterns and (automatic) everyday actions, and attempt to draw together key insights from preceding chapters, identifying opportunities for future research. Or, to continue the book’s adaptation of the Beatles’ song, what are the words of wisdom ‘let eat be’ speaks to us? The rich variety of approaches to studying practices provides fresh, nuanced understandings of how sustainable consumption and everyday food practices are lived in different geographical and socio-cultural contexts and stimulates inspiring and innovative calls for readers to broaden their horizons for transforming consumption practices and accelerating socio-ecological transitions.

In bringing together the different book contributions, we identify five distinctive themes, which are outlined as follows.

Food practices are the result of household negotiations, balancing competing demands and conflicting values

Food practices reflect the interplay of household actors and how they balance competing goals such as convenience, frugality, demonstrating care for others, cultural transmission, personal satisfaction, well-being, and creativity. Such household interactions are embedded in material constraints and social relationships and shaped by the structural conditions of food markets (Chapter 8). How households

resolve competing objectives is rarely consistent – even those with exemplary, healthy, and sustainable menus on most days may ‘relapse’ with a takeaway on Friday nights (Chapter 7). Those valuing quality foods highly still possess budget constraints and can be very price sensitive (Chapter 5). These patterns highlight the limitations of notions of the ‘ethical or green household,’ which typically assume a uniformity in choices and market conditions and which deceptively mask a much messier, and conflicting, reality.

The term ‘food sustainability’ fails to connect with consumers, even where they engage in sustainable practices

Most consumers appear apathetic regarding sustainability and struggle to name sustainable food practices, even if they practice them (Chapter 2). To apply the terminology of Thévenot (2007), sustainability is seldom part of a regime of familiarity. Moreover, for some consumers, sustainability is a disliked concept, employed by politicians for perceived ulterior motives (Chapter 2). Similarly, eco-labels often do not achieve their objective of reducing the distance between producers and consumers (Chapter 4). However, even where sustainability as a concept is distrusted or poorly understood, households often have goals like growing their own food, foraging, and buying more local and organic food.

Shifts to more environmentally friendly diets can have a ‘dark side’

Campaigners often present switches to more environmentally friendly diets as a ‘triple win’ for citizens’ health, the planet, and local economies, with few downsides (The Food Foundation, 2025). However, shifts to more sustainable food practices do not always garner gratification or satisfaction, particularly in the context of Western family culture (Chapter 7) – as any parents who experienced their young children refusing to eat vegetables and demanding only chicken nuggets can recognize. Moreover, this book documents how more sustainable food practices typically require sacrificing additional time and resources, costs which fall on the principal caregivers in households, and thus usually women (Chapter 7). Similarly, household members typically lack equal power (Chapter 9), so that negotiations regarding changing household practices may consequently reinforce existing household hierarchies. As noted in Chapter 7, this raises the question as to whether efforts to introduce more sustainable food practices should fall largely on the care workload of households or need to be addressed more collectively.

Engaging households in more sustainable practices requires a greater focus on reducing barriers to participation

Many initiatives promoting more sustainable consumption focus on increasing consumer knowledge, often through labeling (Grolleau et al., 2016), or seek to heighten individual motivation (Graves & Sarkis, 2018). The latter, for example, is associated with attempts to enhance the unique, positive associations and emotions

of sustainable options and behaviors, as well as connections with aspirational role models (White et al., 2019). However, this book highlights the limitations of these approaches. Eco- and quality labels are often invisible to, and confusing for, consumers (Chapters 6 and 13). Moreover, a focus on environmental awareness or motivation overemphasises individual responsibility and downplays constraints. Regarding constraints, the book documents the systemic factors that inhibit sustainable choices, such as availability, proximity, and prices (Chapters 4 and 5). Consequently, good intentions are often not translated into aligned practices. Increasing the uptake of more sustainable options thus depends on improving the infrastructure, which determines the convenience and cost of more sustainable options. As noted in Chapter 7, ‘facilitating sustainable consumption on a more structural and societal scale, making buying and cooking more sustainable food less time-consuming, expensive, and divulging knowledge and skills on how to do so, would facilitate the task for families.’

Fresh theoretical approaches and experimental methods can transform our understanding of the world

The final set of chapters introduces exciting, novel theoretical and methodological approaches, including post-structural feminist theory (Chapter 10), utopia workshops (Chapter 11), provocative design artifacts (Chapter 12), and semi-fictional narratives and visual storytelling (Chapter 13). These efforts address the need for more engaging and imaginative research methods to understand how meaning, identities, and relationships are made and remade through household food practices. In so doing, the chapters draw attention to the weaknesses of conventional approaches (e.g., rational choice theory, theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behaviour) for explaining households’ food practices. Of theoretical interest, Haraway’s cyborg concept provides a lens for understanding how household kitchens are spaces where human bodies interface with technologies and other species – even someone engaging in ‘artisanal home baking’ may follow a recipe on their smartphone.

Future research

In this final section, we identify three promising avenues for future research, denoted by Beatles’ lyrics, which can build on the insights presented in this volume.

‘All my troubles seemed so far away’ – transitions to more sustainable food practices in the absence of bifurcations

This book documents how bifurcations – major life events such as marriage/divorce, having children, or a health crisis like a heart attack, as well as *force majeure* events like the Covid-19 pandemic, can disrupt established food routines and conventions, potentially leading to more or less sustainable practices. However, such bifurcations largely remain outside of the control of politicians and

campaigners, and one can hardly rely on them to beget a green transition. This generates the question of how actors outside of the household can stimulate positive changes in individual/households' food practices during periods when, to quote the Beatles, 'all my troubles seemed so far away'? This question is particularly pertinent given that food practices are shaped by enduring factors, such as heritage, gender, ethnicity, religion, and class/education, and that conventional public information communications campaigns regarding diet and nutrition have often failed to achieve their objectives (Gill & Boylan, 2012).

While localisation of food production and consumption systems may sometimes go hand in hand with sustainability goals, this is far from universal (Born & Purcell, 2006). Building on previous attempts to transcend the local-global dichotomy (Kirwan, 2014; Smith et al., 2016), further advances are needed in this domain to facilitate citizen-led socio-ecological transitions. To improve the effectiveness of communication campaigns toward more sustainable diets, for instance, one could test how we can reconcile some of the inner/collective tensions and trade-offs between environmental and economic sustainability. Similarly, it would be interesting to explore strategies that can combine traditional know-how and green production on the one hand with scale and innovation on the other. In other words, directly addressing how to achieve food sustainability objectives is often regarded as inevitably conflicting.

'You know you got me goin' now, just like you knew you would' – food practices and the rise of populism

Since the inception of the Strength2Food project, the world has witnessed an upsurge in support for far-right parties and populist politicians. Distrust of 'mainstream' political parties and politicians has grown (Kutiyski et al., 2021). Right-wing populists are typically sceptical toward sustainability agendas and prioritise the short-term affordability of food and farm profitability over long-term sustainability, stricter regulation of production methods, and climate resilience. Their growing influence shapes how sustainability issues are framed publicly, shifting the focus away from international co-operation and technical solutions toward questions of economic burden and short-term, national interests. What appeared as a clear direction of travel a decade ago, toward the greening of food and other production systems, now appears much more uncertain.

Debates have become polarised and embittered, especially in the digital realm. Online echo chambers get people 'goin' now, just like you knew you would,' through the spread of misinformation and heightened polarisation and radicalisation (Brugnoli et al., 2019). This generates a set of timely research questions as to how changes in the political environment affect households' food practices. How do digital engagement and online influencers shape food practices? How can constructive, bottom-up dialogues concerning sustainability be maintained? As noted in the Foreword, there is an urgent need to 'develop theories and methodologies to tackle virtual spaces, operate in them, and use them in their projects.'

'Take a sad song and make it better': Generating practical insights from novel theoretical and methodological approaches

The prototypes discussed in Chapter 12 document overwhelmingly pessimistic imaginings of the future – food scarcity and environmental destruction caused by climate change, social unrest, war, and the breakdown of communal ties. Such negative thoughts prompt reflection on what we can do individually and collectively to prevent such negative outcomes. In considering how we can ‘take a sad song and make it better,’ novel theoretical and experimental methodological approaches can generate new insights for transforming our understanding of food practices. However, this should be an interim goal rather than an end point. An important next step is how to generate from such novel approaches clear actionable insights for practitioners and food policy, and execute appropriate actions. For instance, innovative participatory approaches and experimental methods such as hybrid forums (Amilien et al., 2019), citizen-led policy prototyping (Ansell & Torfing, 2021), and climathons (Simmonds et al., 2025) can bring together citizens to dialogue, co-design, and plead for action. These approaches generate valuable insights for both practitioners and policy makers, which can inform strategies to tackle food sustainability challenges. Focusing on the practical implementation of insights generated from novel theoretical and methodological approaches could form the basis for a worthy successor project to Strength2Food.

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