A new aesthetic of food? Relational reflexivity in the 'alternative' food movement

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Introduction

In recent times, an apparent contradiction between high levels of output and improved food quality has arisen within the food sector. The development of mass food markets, alongside 'Fordist' methods of production and their associated economies of scale, has generated unprecedented abundance (Montanari 1994). Yet, at the same time, industrialisation processes have resulted, seemingly, in greater and greater product standardisation, so that differing foods are rendered more alike in terms of their manufactured content. This process of standardisation affects not just production, processing and retailing, but eating itself, so that meals now carry their industrial properties into the stomachs of modern consumers.¹

Critics of the industrial approach to food provisioning argue that food quality is compromised both by the growing homogenisation of foodstuffs and by the increased health risks that emerge from *within* overly industrialised food production processes. The ensuing food scares provoke increased consumer concern about the conditions of food production (Griffiths and Wallace 1998) and, as a consequence, a sizeable and growing minority of consumers turn to alternative food sources. Fernandez-Armesto summarises this trend, at the end of his recent history of food (2001: 250), when he says that

an artisanal reaction is already underway. Local revulsion from pressure to accept the products of standardised taste has stimulated revivals of traditional cuisines . . . In prosperous markets the emphasis is shifting from cheapness to quality, rarity and esteem for artisanal methods . . . The future will be much more like the past than the pundits of futurology have foretold.

This 'artisanal reaction' comprises a turn towards products that are apparently delivered by simpler and more *natural* processes of production and preparation than is usually the case in mass markets. Local foods, organic foods, traditional foods, GM-free foods, and the like, have become popular in recent years as consumers look for enhanced security through some re-engagement with natural qualities (Nygard and Storstad 1998; Murdoch and Miele 1999). Such products frequently carry claims that their processes of

production are 'traceable', and these claims aim to provide reassurance in a world where industrialised foods are seen as 'placeless' in origin (Miele 2001a).² While the rapid expansion of markets for these so-called 'niche' products can be attributed to a number of factors,³ it is clear that the consumer response to food scares plays a key role.

By differentiating those parts of the food system that are dominated by economic conventions from those that prioritise a wider range of qualities it is possible to show that patterns of development in food consumption are now diverse and multiple rather than singular and uniform (Miele and Murdoch 2003). That is, the food sector is not headed towards ever-greater standardisation but rather towards growing divergence in the kinds of products available. Yet, while the contemporary food market may be able to accommodate (at least temporarily) the various commodities emerging from differing parts of the food sector (Ritzer 2001), it is likely that contradictions between the production of, on the one hand, large volumes and, on the other, distinctive and high-value foods will become more pronounced (see, e.g., Spencer 2002). For instance, industrialised foods challenge the conventional notions of quality that have long been established around traditional and natural methods of production, while the reassertion of alternative foods implies a turning away from industrial technologies and a rediscovering of more typical or authentic production processes. Thus, differing parts of the food sector appear to be heading off on opposing trajectories of development, some towards a more refined or intensive application of science and technology (e.g. GM foods), others towards a re-engagement with natural or traditional production methods (e.g. organic and traditional foods). As this struggle unfolds, so differing conceptions of 'quality' come to be ranged against one another (Wilkinson 1997).

In this chapter we wish to consider one part of this complex picture by examining some contemporary understandings of quality prevalent within *alternative* food markets and networks.⁴ In particular, we aim to assess these alternative conceptions of quality from the perspective of *aesthetics*. Within food sector studies, the aesthetic value of food has been a rather neglected area, with aesthetic aspects often seen as secondary to economic concerns (although a notable exception is Gronow 1997). Yet the aesthetic dimension of quality is clearly important, if for no other reason than that food consumption is ultimately a deeply sensual experience. According to Parasecoli (2001: 69), all the senses are involved in some way in the appreciation of food quality:

Smell . . . allows us to perceive the different ingredients and stimulates us to excrete substances like saliva that precede digestion . . . Appreciation related to touch is based on differences in texture and temperature . . . The sense that is least involved in eating is beyond doubt hearing, which is employed only in the case of crunchy textures and slurping sounds. [But] eating (in a cultural sense) is impossible without taste . . . [there are] primary tastes (sweet, salty, acid, bitter) and nuances (tart, astringent, spicy, balsamic – for which there does no yet exist a satisfactory categorisation) [and an] appreciation of harmony between elements which is primarily intellectual.

As Parasecoli goes on to say (p. 71), beyond those elements ‘there is something more to food’, something connected to experience, cultural belonging and the way foods are ordered within our cultural worlds. It is this ‘something more’ that perhaps comprises the aesthetics of food production, preparation and consumption.

We take this observation as a starting-point for the claim that the narrative of ‘aestheticisation’ might yield an alternative to the ‘economisation’ repertoire that has so often dominated the production and consumption of food and which seems to throw up many problems in the world of food consumption (Fine 1996; Miele and Murdoch 2002a).

In order to study the aesthetic dimension more closely we begin by considering the relationship between economic and aesthetic discourses in the food sector. We identify a process of ‘market aestheticisation’ in which economic concerns configure the quality of given foodstuffs so that the aesthetic becomes merely a means of disguising industrial processes of food delivery. We then go on to speculate that concerns around food safety are provoking the emergence of a new food aesthetic, one based on ‘relationalism’ and ‘embeddedness’. Our hypothesis here is that as food scares reveal the sheer complexity of underlying production relations in the conventional food sector, so consumers seek out foods that enshrine potentially ‘traceable’ social and natural connections. In so doing, consumers act on the belief that those relations are more ‘trustworthy’ than are industrialised relations. We speculate that consumers are subsequently involved in a new engagement with food, one that embraces ‘embedded relations’. We argue that the concern for *embeddedness* brings ‘relational reflexivity’ to the fore among consumers and that this requires a new aesthetic of food to be put in place. Next, we turn to examine the role of new social movements in heightening awareness of the economic, social and environmental relationships that surround foodstuffs. We argue that the market for *quality* foods is strongly configured by the activities of those social and political groupings that aim to alert consumers to the significance of food as a cultural, social and environmental ‘good’. In other words, new social movements promote a form of ‘relational reflexivity’, which encourages consumers to appreciate a broad range of quality characteristics when selecting food items.

We focus on three main characteristics of food:

- its *local* provenance;
- its *environmental* qualities;
- its *social* significance.

We choose three networks that promote each of these quality characteristics. First, in the arena of local foods, we outline the activities of the Slow Food Movement, a group that works to link a gastronomic aesthetic to local and traditional foods. Second, by considering the activities of the Soil Association, an organic food network, we illustrate how environmental qualities can be promoted. Third, we outline how socio-economic considerations are

brought to bear in the Fair Trade Movement. We argue that these three examples serve to illustrate how social movements mobilise a new sensibility towards particular aspects of *quality* in consumption practices. We conclude that the mobilising of this sensibility requires also the mobilising of a new relational aesthetic.

The aestheticising of food

Before turning to examine the role of aesthetics in differing food cultures we clarify our general approach to the notion of *quality*. At a minimum it is obvious that all food, in order to qualify *as* food, must hold quality attributes. Further, these attributes are likely to be both *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* to the foodstuff. As Callon et al. (2002) explain, the intrinsic qualities of goods derive from material composition, edibility, taste and appearance, while extrinsic qualities refer to judgements and evaluations brought to bear by human actors. In practice, the quality of a food product emerges from an interaction between these two dimensions. As a consequence of this interaction, quality can vary markedly from one actor or food culture to another as differing evaluations and judgements are made.

Any foodstuff will therefore comprise a bundle of characteristics and properties – in short, *qualities* – which are revealed through processes of ‘qualification’ that serve to define the nature of the good (Wilkinson 1997; Murdoch et al. 2000). As Callon et al. (2002: 199) put it: ‘All quality is obtained at the end of a long process of qualification, and all qualification aims to establish a constellation of characteristics, stabilised at least for a while, which are attached to the product and transform it temporarily into a tradable good in the market.’ Quality is not, then, a *fixed* characteristic; rather, it is fluid and malleable, and tends to shift as a good passes from one social context to another. Each actor in the food supply chain will aim to evaluate the quality of that good and each evaluation will be made on slightly differing terms. Thus, the good is a ‘variable’, one that can be manipulated by the different actors involved in its production and sale (2002: 200).

One key means of manipulation derives from marketing and communication strategies. In general terms, the role of such strategies is to distinguish the food product from other comparable products so that it stands out from the crowd and easily comes to the attention of consumers. With increasing industrialisation in the sector it is arguable that products are becoming more standardised; thus, packaging and presentation come to the fore in order to draw consumers towards particular brands. At its most superficial level, then, marketing manipulation of the food product aims simply to provide an aesthetic *veneer* of quality. In line with this view, one commentator has recently claimed that

the ‘variety’ you can see on entering a supermarket is only *apparent*, since the basic components are often the same. The only difference is in packaging and in the addition of flavouring and colouring. Fresh fruit and vegetables are of

standard size and colour, and the varieties on sale are very limited in number. (Boge 2001: 15, emphasis added)

Following Welsch (1996: 3), this aesthetic veneer might be referred to as a form of 'market aestheticisation' in which commodities are given a 'sugar coating' of 'aesthetic flair'.

Some commentators believe this market aesthetic has become increasingly significant over the course of the industrialisation process. As the distance between producer and consumer has grown, some means of reconnecting consumer and product (within relatively impersonal markets) has been required. Slater (1997: 31) believes the reconnection can be achieved if the product is somehow 'personified' so that 'the producer must create an image of use value in which potential buyers can recognise themselves'. In certain instances, Best and Kellner (2001: 4) argue, this process of 'personification' is so well-advanced that it is the 'appearance of the commodity that is more decisive than its actual "use value"'.

As is now well known, the food sector has become increasingly globalised and production–consumption relations have been continually stretched (Goodman and Watts 1997). It is therefore to be expected that food commodities have been subject to varying degrees of 'personification'. The process is perhaps most evident in the arena of fast food. Here, increasing standardisation (well described by Ritzer 1996) has been overlaid by relentless waves of branding (well described by Klein 1999). In his recent book *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser (2001: 4) claims that McDonald's 'spends more money on advertising and marketing than any other brand. As a result it has replaced Coca-Cola as the world's most famous brand.' Kroker et al. (1989: 119), in reflecting on McDonald's marketing of its products, argue:

Hamburgers . . . have been aestheticised to such a point of frenzy and hysteria that the McDonald's hamburger has actually vanished into its own sign. Just watch the TV commercials. Hamburgers as *party time* for the kids . . . as *nostalgia time* for our senior citizens . . . as *community time* for small town America; and, as always, hamburgers under the media sign of *friendship time* for America's teenagers (Quoted Smart 1999: 13)

These advertising and marketing efforts raise the profile of fast foods to such an extent that the food itself seems almost residual to the McDonald's experience.⁵

Yet, while the process of market aestheticisation is undoubtedly well-advanced in the food sector, recent events seem to indicate that the commodity has not disappeared quite as completely as Kroker et al. and others assume. In particular, a whole range of food scares has forced the product back into view. In the wake of these scares, eating a burger has become, in psychologist Paul Rozin's words, 'fraught with danger' (quoted in Nemeroff and Davis 2001: 116). Thus, as consumers become aware of the potential dangers of BSE and other diseases so they are forced to rediscover the product 'behind the sign'. In this sense, the increased food risks appear to limit the degree to which a market aesthetic can overwhelm food commodities.

It seems, moreover, that consumers can no longer rely on the aesthetic veneer in evaluating the quality of some industrialised food goods because, as Beck (2001: 273) puts it, 'many things that were once considered universally certain and safe and vouched for by every conceivable authority [e.g. beef] turn . . . out to be deadly. Applying that knowledge to the present and the future devalues the certainties of today.' Beck suggests that, in this uncertain consumption context, many consumers become more 'reflexive' in their relationships with food and other commodities: goods that were once taken for granted are now subject to a critical distancing in which some form of judgement (perhaps based on information stemming from government, media or new social movements – see below) is brought to bear. Halkier (2001: 208) thus believes that, in making their food consumption choices, individuals are 'pulled between an increased insecurity about knowing what to do and an increased awareness of possessing agency, the capacity to do something'.

One means of resolving this tension is through the conscious assessment of *quality*; and, in order to make such an assessment, consumers appear to require an awareness of the economic, social and ecological relations that underpin food production processes. Enhanced reflexivity around product quality may therefore prompt the emergence of a deeper understanding of the complex set of associations that surround both the production and the consumption of food.

In the view of some commentators, there are good reasons for believing that such an understanding may be emerging among growing numbers of consumers. For instance, David Goodman (1999) has recently suggested that the food sector has entered an 'age of ecology' wherein the complex 'metabolic reciprocities' that link production and consumption have come more fully into view (see also FitzSimmons and Goodman 1998). This 'age of ecology' can be discerned, Goodman suggests, in the popularity of organic foods, which are held to retain key natural qualities, and in the consumption of typical and traditional foods, which are believed to carry cultural qualities associated with long-established cuisines. In their different ways, he argues, these food types challenge the instrumental rationalities of the industrialised food sector and require more relationally embedded forms of production and consumption.

Goodman's account seems to indicate that consumers, in assembling food preferences, choices and tastes, are entering into a changed relationship with the objects of those preferences, choices and tastes. And in this changed relationship, they not only 'reflect' on the qualities of food goods but express a desire to genuinely immerse themselves in natural and socio-cultural relations. Thus, organic foods promise some reconnection with a nature that is being increasingly lost to industrial foods, while traditional or typical foods promise a reconnection with social and cultural formations that were previously distant in space or time. By consuming such goods, consumers seem to hope that a greater sense of connectedness can be achieved and that this connectedness will keep at bay the risks associated with industrialised foods (Nygard and Storstad 1998).

In assessing these two aspects of ‘embedded consumption’ – ‘reflection’ on the one hand, and ‘immersion’ on the other – we might follow Lash (1998) in proposing that consumers will somehow need to balance ‘experience’ and ‘judgement’: that is, they will need to apply an instrumental rationality (concerned, for instance, with risk or economic calculation) at the same time as they attempt to deal with indeterminacy and uncertainty in both the knowledge systems that underpin this rationality and in the goods themselves. Lash argues that the need to combine these two aspects of consumption practice will lead consumers to rely on a new form of ‘aesthetic judgement’, one that involves intellectual reflection (in order to establish a rule, something to guide the act of consumption) and imagination, understanding and feeling (in order to establish an aesthetic relationship with the commodity).

The notion of ‘aesthetic judgement’, proposed by Lash, has something in common with Crang’s 1996 notion of ‘aesthetic reflexivity’. Crang suggests that such reflexivity involves tracing the emergence of food commodities as they move through spaces of production, processing and consumption. In Crang’s view, this approach involves ‘roughing up the surfaces’ of normally ‘smooth’ and ‘unblemished’ commodities to reveal the webs of connection and association that necessarily compose foods (see also Bell and Valentine 1997, especially chapter 8). An illustration of such aesthetic reflexivity is provided by Probyn (2000: 14) when she writes that a reflection on eating

can be a mundane exposition of the visceral nature of our connectedness and distance from each other, and from our social environment . . . [It allows us to consider] what and who we are, to ourselves and to others, and can reveal new ways of thinking about those relations . . . In eating, the diverse nature of where and how different parts of ourselves attach to different aspects of the social comes to the fore and becomes the stuff of reflection.

Probyn’s discussion of McDonald’s, vegetarianism, eating disorders and other aspects of the consumption process can be read as an attempt to reflect on *connectedness*. It might therefore be seen as an attempt to utilise the notion of aesthetic judgement outlined by Lash and by Crang. In Probyn’s account, this aesthetic appears to impose a dual requirement. On the one hand, consumers must assess risks and other aspects of the product in reflexive terms. This process requires that a *critical distance* is established between subject and object of consumption so that a reflexive evaluation can be carried out. On the other hand, it requires a new aesthetic relationship of some kind so that a sensual connection, something that lies outside of formal systems of calculation, can be established. By combining these two aspects, we can suggest that a ‘relational aesthetic’ is required as consumers attempt to assess the various quality foods that confront them.

Relational reflexivity in the new food movements

Gronow and Warde (2001: 219) have recently proposed the term ‘ordinary consumption’ to describe routine consumption activities such as the purchasing

of food. In their view, ordinary consumption implies that consumer choices are made in line with 'taken-for-granted' assumptions generated within particular social worlds (associated with varied forms of social belonging). From that perspective, it seems likely that conventional mass food markets have developed on the back of ordinary consumption activities. However, ordinary consumption depends on consumer trust in conventional products. As we have shown, there are now reasons for believing that this trust has begun to break down: recent trends suggest that many consumers – as they attempt to come to terms with the implications of food scares – are engaged in a requalifying of food-stuffs. This requalification process requires new assessments and judgements to be made that can dislodge or replace the many taken-for-granted assumptions about food quality that have prevailed in the post-war era. We have argued above that requalification requires consumers to *distance* themselves from food goods in order that they might *reconnect* in new ways.

One striking feature of such distancing and reconnecting processes is that they are led, in the main, not by governments or producers' associations but by new social movements, notably environmental groupings and consumer associations. These actors have long pointed to the problems associated with industrialised and globalised production processes, and have gone on to assert alternative modes of production and consumption. Thus, new social movements frequently play a key role in adjudicating over notions of quality. They attempt to broaden out quality criteria in order to incorporate the environmental, social and cultural impacts of production and consumption.

In what follows we illustrate how the new social movements attempt to complicate notions of quality; in doing so we use a number of short case studies, based on the assertion of local, natural and social quality criteria. These studies highlight how concerns over culture and tradition, the environment and the social impacts of production and consumption are brought to bear in the construction of 'alternative' food markets. We consider whether these concerns work to orchestrate relational reflexivity in the food sector and whether they might come to comprise a new aesthetic of food.

Local connections: the Slow Food Movement

We begin with a group which has made the improvement of food quality its main area of concern – the Slow Food Movement which emerged out of the regional cultures of food that predominate in Italy. The organisation was established in 1986 in Bra, a small town in the Piedmont region, by a number of food writers and chefs. Their immediate motivation came from an anxiety about the potential impact of McDonald's on local food cultures (Resca and Gianola 1998). The movement's founders were concerned that the arrival of McDonald's would threaten not the up-market restaurants frequented by the middle- and upper-class urbanites, but the local *osterie* and *trattorie*, the places serving local dishes which have traditionally been frequented by people of all classes. Because, in the Italian context, traditional eateries retain a

close connection to local food production systems, Slow Food argued that their protection requires the general promotion of local food cultures. Slow Food thus proposed that resistance to 'McDonaldisation' requires the expansion of markets for local and typical foods (Miele and Murdoch 2002b).

In keeping with that objective, Slow Food established a local structure, to be coordinated by a central headquarters in Bra. Initially the local branches were confined to Italy, though in 1989 Slow Food was formally launched as an international movement. The international manifesto indicates that within the organisation gastronomic issues were to the fore. It says that Slow Food is committed to 'a firm defence of quiet material pleasure' and claims its aim is 'to rediscover the richness and aromas of local cuisines to fight the standardisation of Fast Food'. In keeping with a gastronomic sensibility, it goes on to say, 'our defence should begin at the table with Slow Food. Let us rediscover the flavours and savours of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of Fast Food . . . That is what real culture is all about: developing taste rather than demeaning it' (www.slowfood.com). The movement thus began to establish itself outside Italy and at the time of writing, *convivia* exist in 50 countries and the movement has around 70,000 members.⁶

In articulating a response to the spread of McDonald's, Slow Food has effectively become a clearing-house for gastronomic information about local foods, initially in Italy but, latterly, across the globe. The main means by which knowledge of local and typical cuisines is disseminated is the movement's publishing company, established in 1990. It publishes a range of guides in order to lead consumers to the food products available in local cuisine areas. These publications have developed a highly aestheticised approach to local and traditional foods, displaying such foods in lavish settings, using extensive artwork and photography. Typical foods are shown to be simultaneously authentic *and* sophisticated. Colours are rich and warm, shapes are elegant and evocative, settings are sophisticated and stimulating. Thus, Slow Food presents traditional and typical foods as visually luscious; it enhances their optical qualities so that these food products appeal to the sophisticated visual sensibilities of modern consumers (thereby, hopefully, expanding traditional markets).

However, Slow Food also tries to draw consumers beyond the aesthetic veneer. For instance, it concentrates a great deal of attention on what it calls 'taste education', by which it means ensuring that people retain the ability to appreciate the varied physical ('intrinsic') qualities of local foods.⁷ In the main, this educative process takes place through the activities of local members and groups. Every Slow Food group is encouraged to organise theme dinners, food-and-wine tours, tasting courses, local food conventions, and so on. Likewise, the central headquarters puts a great deal of emphasis on national and international taste events as a means of keeping 'alive forgotten flavours'.⁸

Such activities seek to expand the markets for traditional foods by bringing them to the attention of both local and cosmopolitan consumers. Slow Food thus articulates an alternative set of quality concerns for those consumers

suspicious of the industrial approach to food provisioning. In so doing, it voices implicit and explicit criticisms of the ‘massification of taste’, criticisms it articulates in the main *aesthetically*. Slow Food sees food as an important feature of the quality of life, the pleasure it gives is therefore its most important characteristic. As the Slow Food manifesto puts it, the aim is to promulgate a new ‘philosophy of taste’, the guiding principle of which is ‘conviviality and the right to taste and pleasure’. The pleurability of food derives from the aesthetic aspects of production, processing and consumption. All such activities are considered ‘artful’: they require skill and care, and they evolve by building on the knowledges of the past to meet the new social needs of contemporary consumers.

In sum, Slow Food aims to challenge the diffusion of a fast-food culture by asserting an alternative aesthetics of food production, preparation and consumption. Starting from the acknowledgement that food is imbued with symbolic meanings, and that patterns of food consumption have evolved over time according to the gradual acquisition of specific tastes, Slow Food promotes the values of typical products and regional cuisines because they reflect long-established cultural ‘arts of living’. As leading Slow Food activist Alberto Capatti (1999: 4) has put it, ‘food is a cultural heritage and should be consumed as such’. Thus, for Slow Food an aesthetic appreciation of food requires an appreciation of the temporal flow of food from the past into the present: ‘Slow food is profoundly linked to the values of the past. The preservation of typical products, the protection of species . . . the cultivation of memory and taste education – these are all aspects of this passion of ours for time’ (1999: 5).

Ecological connections: the Soil Association (SA)

The SA was formed in the UK in 1946. It campaigns to increase the amount of organic food produced and consumed within the UK and acts to certify organic standards on farms and in food-processing enterprises. Its logo provides an assurance that the food has been produced and processed according to high organic standards. Currently the SA has around 20,000 members (its highest ever figure), and is involved in food qualification at all stages of the food chain – production, processing, retailing and consumption. In short, the SA is a key regulator of organic quality in the UK.⁹

The catalyst for the SA’s formation was the publication in 1943 of Lady Eve Balfour’s *The Living Soil*. In it Balfour identified the importance of soil restoration and improvement and argued for an ‘organic’ approach to farming the land – that is, an approach with soil fertility at its heart. The book identified a number of problems with contemporary farming practice and alerted a group of influential scientists and activists to the need for improved standards of land management. Three years later these activists came together to form the SA. Its avowed aim was nothing less than the renewal of British agriculture.

During its early years the SA focused on investigating the scientific principles that underpin environmentally integrated agricultural systems, with particular attention paid to soil management and animal husbandry. As Matless (1998:106) explains, 'English tradition was to be supplemented by scientific experiment. A dissident ecological science was seen as confirming the virtues of traditional practice as opposed to contemporary "progressive" orthodoxy.' Using scientific research farms, the SA developed a rigorous set of methods for the management of more 'ecologically friendly' agricultural systems. Having over a number of years derived a set of organic principles from in-depth research it then felt able to incorporate them into organic standards that could be applied in a variety of production locations. Through the dissemination of information and advice on organic farming the SA could push forward the renewal of agriculture for which Eve Balfour had earlier called.

The need for renewal became starkly evident during the 1960s following the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962). In a context where the problems with scientific, or industrial, agriculture were being widely discussed, the SA's standards gained new legitimacy – a legitimacy that was further enhanced by the emergence of the environmental movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Now the organic 'greening' of agriculture could be set alongside the more general 'greening' of industrial society.

Yet, despite growing support for the organic approach, the SA remained somewhat distant from the environmental movement (Clunies-Ross and Cox 1995). In part, this distance reflected tensions within the organisation over its role and objectives. On the one side, a group of traditionalists (including the founding members) believed that the SA should continue to concentrate on scientific research; on the other, a younger group argued that the SA should campaign more aggressively against industrial food production and seek to influence consumers so that the market for organics could be expanded. According to Reed (2000a) these tensions came to a head at the SA's 1982 AGM when both groups put forward their views in a heated and, at times, acrimonious debate. The view of the traditionalists was summarised by Eric Clarke in the *Soil Association Quarterly Review* for 1982:

I do not believe . . . that the Soil Association should take as a major activity a policy to persuade consumers to buy the products produced by some of our members. There may well be a useful place for such a campaign, but it should be carried out by those organisations specifically orientated to those interests. (Clarke 1982: 22)

The alternative view was summarised by another member, Francis Blake, in the *Soil Association Quarterly Review* for 1983: 'It is our duty, and our opportunity, to take our organic message to the consumer, to educate them, to safeguard them and to provide the meeting point between them and producers' (Blake 1983: 24).

Ultimately, the latter view prevailed and the younger, more radical, group-taking control of the SA. It now began to campaign more vigorously on

consumption issues, as illustrated by its new campaign – ‘Eat Organic’. The new approach stemmed from the belief that

without an increase in public demand wholefood shops will drift away from selling organic food: without a strongly growing demand from such outlets there will be no increase in acreage under organic cultivation. It is not possible to achieve or create this demand without a process of education. (Soil Association 1982: 2)

In other words, the SA would teach consumers to think ‘organically’.

A further fillip to the consumer awareness campaign came with the BSE crisis in the late 1980s. Now the concerns about industrial agriculture expressed by Eve Balfour, Rachel Carson and others were seemingly being borne out by the emergence of a mysterious new disease. Moreover, it soon became clear that BSE was associated with the intensive production systems that had come to dominate the livestock sector in the UK; and on that basis it seemed likely that organic farms would remain disease-free. As a result the SA launched the ‘Safe Meat’ campaign in 1989, alerting consumers to the virtues of organic meat products. This theme endured throughout the 1990s and organic sales began to increase, especially after the Government admitted the link between animal and human forms of CJD in 1996. As Reed (2000b: 21) explains:

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, [organic agriculture] had shown itself free from the disease, so side-stepping the gradual erosion of confidence otherwise experienced by the food industry. This was the disease opportunity structure; freedom from disease gave not only market share but also cultural ascendancy and political advantage. The industrial order had become pathological; the observational order of organic was healthy.

With the growth of the market for organic products in the wake of the BSE crisis, the SA increased its membership along with the income generated from certification processes.¹⁰ It now administers certification standards on behalf of the UK government and has extended its certification schemes into nineteen countries around the world. Moreover, the increased resources available to the organisation have allowed it to diversify its activities. In particular, it has begun to focus on local food linkages around the organic food supply chain. In a recent joint-venture with the Countryside Agency, the ‘Eat Organic – Buy Local’ campaign, it aims to set up local partnerships and networks in order to support local producers, link production and consumption, and ensure that organic products find their way into local public institutions such as schools and hospitals. It is also assisting with the development of box schemes (i.e. direct sales of organic products), community-supported agriculture and farmers’ markets. All these initiatives are aimed at strengthening the local capacity of the organic system.

Over the course of its history the SA has moved a long way from its early scientific origins. It now operates as a campaign group, as a certification body, as a research organisation and as a consumer information service. In its engagement with almost all aspects of organic production and consumption

the SA must balance a number of competing demands on its time and resources. However, it is clear that attention to the concerns of consumers has grown significantly in recent years. As the SA's website (www.soilassociation.org) admits: 'Raising awareness will be instrumental in elevating the commitment of the British public to organic food.' This awareness-raising aspect of the SA's activities perhaps accords most closely with the notion of relational reflexivity discussed above. In provoking consumers to think about the relationship between the ecologies of production and the safety of food products, the SA is seeking to draw consumers towards its reassuring logo in the expectation that this aesthetic mark will provide a robust connection to safe and healthful environments.

Social connections: 'fair trade'

While Slow Food works to protect and promote local food products, and the SA aims to enhance the 'sustainability' of food through the dissemination of organic principles and practices, fair trade (FT) focuses on the economic and social dimensions of food production. In particular, it aims to challenge conventional terms of trade so that poorer producers might benefit (Raynolds 2000). Its goal, according to its website (www.fairtrade.org.uk) is to 'change international commercial relations in such a way that disadvantaged producers can increase their control over their own future, have a fair and just return for their work, [have] continuity of income, and decent working conditions' (Quoted Raynolds 2003: 60). The FT network acts to link producers to consumers through a labelling scheme, which provides a means of identifying FT products. The scheme is backed up by systems of certification undertaken by the various FT organisations. These systems work to register producers and license importers (importantly, the certification process is paid for by the importers of the products; see Raynolds 2003). Once producers are incorporated into a scheme they receive the international product price plus a premium that ensures reinvestment at the local level of production. Importantly, they also benefit from favourable trading arrangements, as Rice (2001: 48) explains:

According to the fair trade rules of operation, grower associations may request up to 60 [per cent] of their payments as pre-payment for promised deliveries, essentially obtaining credit from these buyers. For importers handling, say a container of coffee. . . such advances mean substantial outlays of capital prior to receiving the product. The credit often comes at times when grower groups are most in need of resources in preparing their farms for the upcoming harvest.

At present, around 70 per cent of FT goods are from the food sector, mainly coffee, cocoa, bananas and sugar, and around 400 producer organisations in 45 countries engage in some form of FT. In Europe, FT products are sold through approximately 65,000 retail outlets and the annual aggregate retail value of the market is calculated to be around 260 million Euros (EFTA 2002).

The European Fair Trade Association (EFTA) began in the early 1960s when Oxfam UK decided to create an alternative trading channel through which products from deprived regions in southern hemisphere countries could be marketed in ways that were of primary benefit to the producers. Parallel initiatives were established in other European countries, so that by the 1980s there was a profusion of competing schemes. Products were sold within the alternative channels through accredited retailers, mail order catalogues and local market outlets. From the mid-1980s onwards, however, FT products began to appear in more mainstream stores. This extension of the market was facilitated by the use of FT labels on all certified products. The labelling organisations offered commercial importers ‘a register of monitored producer groups, a set of criteria as to how to do Fair Trade business, and a label that distinguished Fair Trade products from others’ (EFTA 2002: 23).

This formalisation of ‘fair trade’ required a rationalising of the competing networks. In 1990 twelve European organisations came together to form EFTA, a coordinating body that serves to disseminate information to the various FT networks. The number of differing labels was also reduced by the founding in 1997 of the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO), which incorporated EFTA’s groups as well as similar networks in the USA, Canada and Japan. According to Renard (2003: 90), the FLO is responsible ‘for securing certification of all labelled products as well as granting licences for the use of the label to manufacturers and/or importers who comply with the conditions of Fair Trade’. It has established certification procedures for coffee, bananas, cocoa, tea, sugar, honey, orange juice, rice and wine. These procedures aim to ensure:

- direct linkages between producers and importers;
- the payment of premium prices for FT goods;
- the provision of producer credit;
- democratic accountability among producer groups;
- the application of international labour standards;
- environmental best practice (Raynolds 2003).

As the FT network has achieved greater cohesiveness, so the FT label has gained in significance. FT goods are now sold in a host of locations, from organic wholefood shops through to Starbucks. Whatever the retail location, the label carries a guarantee that the proceeds from the product’s sale will go directly from consumer to producer. Thus, as Raynolds (2002: 415) puts it, ‘Fair Trade labels address . . . global ethical concerns, assuring consumers that, as the Fairtrade mark reads, buying these products “guarantees a better deal for Third World producers”’. In this sense, FT ‘humanises’ the trade process: it makes the ‘producer–consumer chain as short as possible so that consumers become aware of the culture, identity, and conditions in which producers live’ (EFTA 1998, quoted Raynolds 2003: 61).

Evaluation

These three ‘alternative’ food movements present consumers with differing quality considerations. First, Slow Food responds to the crisis of trust in the food sector by highlighting the ‘quiet material pleasure’ (as the Slow Food manifesto puts it) that comes from an immersion in local and regional cuisines. This ‘quiet pleasure’ requires the gastronomic appreciation of typical tastes and a reflexive appreciation of quality, where quality stems from the consumer’s understanding of both the intrinsic properties of food and the way these properties derive from cultural connections. Second, the SA emphasises the environmental problems that spill out of the conventional food sector. It claims that a ‘cheap food policy’ has delivered ‘dramatic declines in farmland wildlife, greenhouse gas emissions, soil degradation, a decline in food nutrient content, pesticide residues, food scares, rapidly increasing incidence of food allergies and intolerance, and a loss of consumer confidence’ (Soil Association 2001: 2). The SA claims that these ‘externalities’ can be effectively incorporated back into the food chain only if organic principles and practices are brought to bear. Thus, the SA charter mark allows consumers to connect to the ‘environments of production’ in order to promote ‘best organic practice’. Lastly, FT seeks to establish direct and unmediated relations between producers and consumers so that increased value can be fed back down the supply chain to the sites of production. Again, certification procedures are used in order to tie both producers and retailers into a ‘fair trade’ regime. The FT logo allows consumers to *buy into* this regime in the expectation that a significant part of the value generated will find its way back to the social contexts of production.

These three movements highlight the varied nature of quality criteria in the ‘alternative’ food sector. They show that ‘quality’ can be interpreted in different ways and that it can be used to throw light on diverse aspects of production and consumption. While the intrinsic properties of the goods are important (notably for Slow Food and the SA), the socio-economic evaluations made by both producers and consumers are also emphasised (notably by Slow Food and FT). The three groups aim to regulate and monitor alternative food chains while simultaneously attracting consumers to their ‘quality’ food products.

Moreover, all three networks utilise aesthetic criteria in their efforts to draw consumers towards the goods. Such criteria are used to provide assurance that these ‘alternatives’ can be genuinely differentiated from conventional product ranges; that is, they aim to go beyond the market aesthetic by showing that the aesthetic veneer of the product is closely aligned with its substantive and intrinsic qualities. Thus, charter marks and logos are employed to draw consumers into a new relationship with the environments of production. In short, the marks and logos *fold* complex sets of relations into the food products in ways that permit easy consumer appreciation. They therefore promote a new aesthetic of food, one based on *connectedness* to those natural and social conditions that are thought to ultimately determine the quality of food.

Conclusion

In the preceding pages we have argued that new notions of quality are being brought to bear within new food chains and movements. We have suggested that these new notions derive in part from a growing dissatisfaction with conventional food supply chains. This dissatisfaction has concentrated around food scares and the apparent quality problems that follow from the industrialisation of the food sector. Standardised and mechanised processes of production yield homogeneous products that are thought to vary little in their quality attributes. Thus, consumers turn to 'alternatives', to products that are thought to carry environmental, cultural and social qualities into the consumption experience. These alternative products come in many shapes and sizes, but all hold the promise that their relations of production are ultimately traceable in some way.

We have further argued that this shift in perception requires both a disconnection from foodstuffs – so that some form of re-evaluation can be made – and a reconnection – so that some new pattern of consumption can be established. We have termed this double movement 'relational reflexivity', a notion that indicates how consumers distance themselves from conventional food products before establishing revised relations with the alternatives. We have suggested that this relational perspective requires a new aesthetic appreciation of food, one that is grounded in the multiple connections that run through and around food supply chains. We have also proposed that new social movements are instrumental in promoting this 'relational aesthetic'. In seeking to alter food consumption patterns in line with a heightened awareness of cultural, social and environmental criteria, the new food movements simultaneously alert consumers to problems in the conventional food sector and to the virtues of 'quality' food products in the local, organic and FT arenas. New social movements thus play a key role in orchestrating relational reflexivity.

In conclusion, we wish (following Browne et al. 2000) to enter a caveat to the rather broad distinction between conventional and alternative food chains utilised in this chapter. We have attempted to argue here that differing notions of quality are being employed in the two spheres. Yet, on close inspection it is clear that there are many similarities between the two: on the one hand, supermarkets and other key players in the conventional chain point to increasing safety, nutrition, taste, and so on, in the goods they produce and sell; on the other hand, the SA and the FT groups tailor their products so they can be sold through conventional outlets to conventional consumers. The result is that goods designated 'conventional' or 'alternative' begin to shade into one another so that their clear separation seems almost impossible (see Winter 2003).

It is for this reason that we have focused our attention here on the aesthetic dimension; we have suggested that the sensibility towards quality being promoted by the new food movements leads to a 'relational aesthetic' and that

this differs markedly from the ‘market aesthetic’ found in conventional chains. While the two approaches often use the same tools, their objectives are entirely different: the market aesthetic aims to cement a *disconnection* between the producers and the consumers of food by disguising food’s industrial origins; the relational aesthetic aims to cement a *connection* between the two by highlighting the social and natural environments in which food is made. In this respect, the ‘alternative’ food sector can be seen as giving rise to a new appreciation of food, one that sees food quality as intrinsically bound into the rich and varied contexts of production.

Notes

- 1 Consider the following description of McDonaldised fast food: ‘the entire fast food meal is composed of separable, modular interchangeable elements. The inner structure of the burger itself can easily be separated into further components, all open for inspection. The assembly of each hamburger has a clearly mechanical nature. Even the look of the different parts alludes to various technological processes, rather than having the conventional appearance of cooked food’ (Boym 2001: 7).
- 2 It is, however, evident that supermarkets are seeking to put traceability systems in place for a wide range of food markets. Consumers are being asked to trust the product by trusting the supermarket.
- 3 Miller (1995: 7) identifies the following as significant factors: ‘the ability of shops to use new information technology exactly to match supply and demand; the market niching of stores now carefully differentiated by segments defined by marketing research and recognized by designers; the dynamic forms of customisation with flexible automation; [and] the degree of subcontracting’.
- 4 We put ‘alternative’ into quotation marks because we recognise the elusive nature of what the term is used to describe. We use it here to identify overt attempts to counter standardisation and globalisation in the food sector – notably those associated with local, traditional and organic products. As some authors (e.g. Winter 2003) have pointed out, there are problems with the notion of the ‘alternative food sector’ as the grounds for allocating production processes to either the conventional or the alternative sector are frequently unclear. We have elsewhere (Murdoch and Miele 1999) accepted this point and have sought to show how conventional and alternative products might be allocated to the differing domains.
- 5 Ray Kroc is famously quoted (by Love 1995: 303) as saying of McDonald’s: “‘We’re not in the hamburger business; we’re in show business.’”
- 6 According to its founder, Carlo Petrini (2001a: xii), Slow Food now comprises ‘a vast global network of men and women capable of generating ideas and programs to defend taste and the right to a responsible, knowing form of pleasure; one that is respectful of cultural and material diversity, and one which is open to all’.
- 7 As Carlo Petrini (2001b: 5) puts it, ‘much knowledge is to be gained through the taste buds and the mucous membrane in the nose, and attaining such knowledge is an experience that is closely related to pleasure’.
- 8 The following are perhaps the most noteworthy: ‘Excellentia’, a three-day meeting involving 5,000 people from all over Italy in twice-yearly blind tastings of

international and Italian wines; 'Taste Week' (*La Settimana del Gusto*), which sets out to familiarise young people with quality catering; and the 'Hall of Taste', a food fair held every two years in Turin, a large, prestigious event that in 1998 recorded over 120,000 visitors.

- 9 It claims to inspect around 70 per cent of the organic food grown in the UK and its logo is perhaps the best known of all the organic trademarks. It claims that its organic standards are among the highest and that these laid the basis for the official UK organic standards regime when it was introduced in 1987.
- 10 For instance, the demand for organic food in the UK is calculated by the SA to be increasing at an annual rate of around 40 per cent (see Soil Association 2002).

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