Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development
ISSN: 2152-0801 online
https://foodsystemsjournal.org

JAFSCD COMMENTARY

Manifesto for a regionally oriented food industry

Marco Ginanneschi *
Finanza Futura Srl

Submitted August 17, 2022 / Accepted August 17, 2022 / Published online October 11, 2022

Citation: Ginanneschi, M. (2022). Manifesto for a regionally oriented food industry. *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development, 12*(1), 13–17. https://doi.org/10.5304/jafscd.2022.121.002

In the movie *Snowpiercer*, Oscar-winning Korean filmmaker Oscar Bong Joon-ho portrayed the future of food as a brown gelatine bar made of insect proteins (Ramos-Niaves, 2021). According to Jacques Attali (2019), unless the current system changes, within a few years the great majority of people will eat only standardized and processed food. No pleasure will be left to their palate. Only the rich will be able to afford healthy, diverse, and tasty food.

It is a matter of fact that feeding a planet[1] that will soon be inhabited by 10 billion people requires an increase in yields and production levels (Marsden & Morley, 2014). If this is the future of agriculture, downstream processing could end up being managed by a few multinational corporations—the "food masters" (Liberti, 2016)—who are interested only in reducing the unit costs of production while delivering a limited set of standardized products to the world market. In this framework, food distribution will be greatly simplified, with stores competing solely for the best locations and paying no heed to the quality and variety of the product range.

Will it end like this? Not necessarily. We can still do something to avoid this outcome.

According to the European Union, consumers want food that is fresh, less processed, sustainably sourced, and possibly coming from shorter supply chains (European Commission, 2020). Considering an average food shopping receipt, these aspirations look "idealized."[2] In Italy, as in other nations, our shopping carts feature a high number of ready-to-eat meals, packaged products, and snacks. Forced to abandon the idea of producing directly what they eat, today's wealthier consumers satisfy their need for more natural foods *away from home*: for

* Marco Ginanneschi, Ph.D., CEO, Finanza Futura Srl, Florence, Italy; marco.ginanneschi@finanzafutura.it

Author Note

An earlier version of this commentary (Ginanneschi, 2022a) was published in Italian on June 15, 2022, in the online bulletin of Accademia dei Georgofili, an Italian agriculture research institution established in 1753.

[1] "Feeding the planet" was the slogan of the 2015 World Exposition hosted by Milan, Italy.
[2] "Nous nous nourrissons de nutriments, mais aussi d'imaginaire [We feed on nutrients, but also on imagination]" (Fischler, 2001, p. 14).

example, dining in short-chain holiday farms (*agriturismo*), in hyperlocal restaurants (De Chabert-Rios & Deale, 2018), or at the table of star chefs who grow their own vegetables.

In this context, the food industry is still perceived as being mainly responsible for the loss of naturalness (Román et al., 2017), hyper-processing, and standardization of food. Its role in food safety and preservation is frequently forgotten, much like its contribution to feeding a world population grown from 3 billion in 1960 to 8 billion in 2022. The structure of the Italian food industry, however, is fundamentally different from the multinational corporation model: it is composed of more than 50,000 manufacturing companies with an average size of 8 employees (Cirianni et al., 2021).

Today, the ecological transition and its European underpinnings—the Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy—pressure the components of the food supply chain to focus on sustainability, a circular economy, and zero climate impact. Our way of producing food is undergoing an unprecedented paradigm shift. Considerable funds will be employed to bring about this green revolution. However, the means to implement the transition are still a matter of debate. For Italy, it is a unique opportunity to strengthen the connections between agriculture, processing, distribution, and consumers' aspirations. Thinking regionally can help change the current food system in a strategic way (Ruhf & Clancy, 2022).

Despite being known as one of the best destinations for food lovers, when it comes to regional consumption of locally produced food, even Italy starts behind the curve. For example, recent research (Ferraresi & Turchetti, 2022) highlighted that Tuscan foods, produced entirely or in part in Tuscany, represent only 18% of the Tuscan diet,[3] a percentage common to most other Italian regions[4] (except Lombardy, Emilia Romagna, and Trentino Alto Adige, which are all above 25%). Such a low percentage has a series of explanations and can be fully understood only by considering the structure of national consumption and the functioning of the agricultural market, which is being pushed by the European Union to be more competitive. This number is not a direct expression of food self-sufficiency (Clapp, 2017), but it is closely linked to the way arable land is used at the regional level. In Tuscany, arable land is mostly devoted to grapevines and olive trees due to a widespread belief that these crops offer the highest economic return, thanks to exports, when compared to alternatives (see Figure 1).

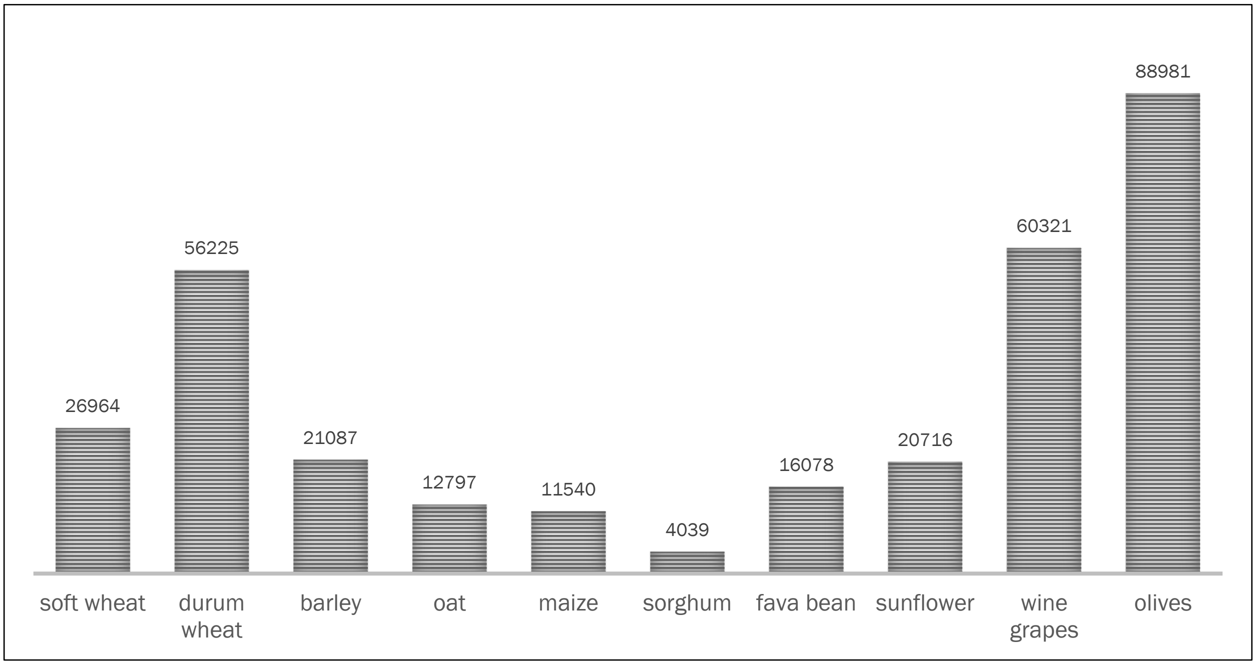
This kind of specialization had been economically and socially valued until globalization was challenged first by the pandemic and then by the war in Ukraine. It has been a winning development model so long as regular trade flows allowed (a) the smooth functioning of long supply chains, (b) economic convergence among countries, and (c) the constant reduction of food prices everywhere (environmental costs excluded).

Nowadays this model shows several weaknesses (one being food security) and looks fragile. It is a model in which local food must be reintroduced and its consumption increased. Tuscans, and all Italians with them, should pursue a minimum objective of 25% of consumption supplied by regional food. This number is also an approximation of the level of intra-supply chain collaboration that can be reached by economic actors at the local level.

The need is for a cultural initiative to strengthen national and regional food supply chains. The initial step consists of building a common language for farmers, processors, and distributors. The fundamental word of this new lexicon is "territory." Consumers ask for local food, while farmers control crop management in the local territory: the challenge is to fill the gaps in processing and distribution. The keystone of the whole project is "gastronomic heritage." Several quality champions already contribute to the appeal and international diffusion of the food mark "Made in Italy": they are the 315 PDO (protected designation of origin), PGI protected geographical indication), and TSG (traditional speciality guaranteed) food products

[3] More precisely, Tuscany directly supplies only 18% of the food requirements of its 3.7 million inhabitants (alcoholic beverages not included).
[4] Italy is divided into 20 regions that enjoy political and administrative autonomy.

Figure 1. Top 10 Crops in Tuscany by Growing Area, 2020 (Hectares)



Source: Data processed from https://www.regione.toscana.it/-/agricoltura-in-toscana-dati-sintetici-2018-2020

under the European geographical indication scheme,[5] among which are Parmigiano Reggiano and Prosciutto di Parma. Their production value totals 7.3 billion euros (ISMEA-Qualivita, 2021), a remarkable accomplishment but only a fraction of the 170 billion euro value of the combined Italian agriculture and food industry (Cirianni et al., 2021). Italy needs to play to another asset, its gastronomic heritage, which relies on an array of more than 5,000 agricultural and processed foods drawn from local traditions. These are defined by a 1998 national law[6] that gave the Italian regions the right to list in a national register the names and specifications of local products and recipes—*Prodotti agroalimentari tradizionali* (PATs)—with at least 25 years of history behind them (Ginanneschi, 2022b). It is this varied repository of vegetable species, ingredients, and dishes that Italy must draw on, to bring about the necessary green conversion, increase the consumption of local food, and reach the 25% target share. Lucca's curly black cabbage, Certaldo's onions, Casentino's sheep cheese, the *pici* (a kind of fresh noodles), the *cecina* (a chickpea-flour pie), Lamporecchio's *brigidini* (anise-flavored wafers) or Livorno's *cacciucco* (a traditional fish soup) are just a few high-potential foods from the Tuscan basket of 464 PATs. Every Italian region has its list of champions to deploy.

At the operational level, there are several steps to take: researching PATs' functional properties, selecting the most promising ones, planting new crops, developing special processing techniques, informing consumers, and seeking European Union recognition for a trademark especially devoted to the PATs. Soon the Italian regions will decide on the necessary tools to be adopted to carry out the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP): the time to implement this project is now.

But above all, for this policy to succeed, the attitude of the food industry is crucial. It will have to work closely with the regions and with farmers, be culturally capable of rediscovering the lost crops

[5] See an overview of the EU geographical indications and quality schemes at https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/farming/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes/geographical-indications-and-quality-schemes-explained_en#traditional-speciality-guaranteed
[6] D. Lgs n. 173/1998 (Art. 8)

of our ancestors, flexible enough to process even small product batches, cooperate with artisan producers, be digitally competent but socially aware, and, last but not least, be sincerely committed to the preservation of taste and traditional foodways. This is what I call "a regionally oriented food industry," a third way between the corporation model delivering standardized food and our idealized imagery of vegetable growers and home chefs.

This third way can gather support from all sides. However, as with every new idea, there will also be resistance. One could claim, for example, that only direct control over productive land guarantees the real naturalness of food: if this is the dream of a post-industrial society, it is also true that a short chain may derive "from a reduction of the steps in the supply chain shortening the product's route through the agri-food system" (Giuca, 2013, p. 12). Others could observe that there are already too many trademarks in the market and that adding a new category for the PATs risks only increasing consumers' confusion. However, the contrary is actually true. As Fischler (2001) correctly argued, "if we do not know what we are eating, it becomes more difficult to know what we will be but also who we are" (p. 70). In other words, the possibility of recognizing the PATs through a correct advertisement on the food label and on the store shelves can only reduce consumers' anxieties.

To develop a regionally oriented food industry, only a minimum effort is required. As Thaler and Sunstein (2008) would say, it is just a question of gently pushing economic actors in the right direction. One could consider a special set of research and development (R&D) incentives designed for this specific industry or an advertisement campaign to promote the PATs at the national and European levels. In exchange for this small public effort, consumers could have more sustainable foods on their tables, enlarge their spectrum of food choices, and recover old traditions together with a fundamental part of their cultural identity.

This type of food industry that is tradition-linked and local-ingredients-intensive could serve as a stimulus for a biodiversity-friendly and environmentally aware new generation of food processing in Europe and the world.

References

Attali, J. (2019). *Histoires de l'alimentation: De quoi manger est-il le nom?* [*Food stories: What does eating mean?*]. Fayard.

Cirianni, A., Fanfani, R., & Gismondi, R. (2021). *Struttura produttiva e performance economica della filiera agroalimentare italiana* [*Production structure and economic performance of the Italian agri-food chain*] (ISTAT Working Papers No. 4). https://www.istat.it/it/files//2021/06/IWP_4-2021.pdf

Clapp, J. (2017). Food self-sufficiency: Making sense of it, and when it makes sense. *Food Policy, 66,* 88–96. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2016.12.001

De Chabert-Rios, J., & Deale, C.S. (2018). Taking the local food movement one step further: An exploratory case study of hyper-local restaurants. *Tourism and Hospitality Research, 18*(3), 388–399. https://doi.org/10.1177/1467358416666137

European Commission. (2020). *A Farm to Fork Strategy for a fair, healthy and environmentally-friendly food system* (Report No. COM(2020) 381final). https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:ea0f9f73-9ab2-11ea-9d2d-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF

Ferraresi, T., & Turchetti, S. (2022, April 11). *L'esposizione del sistema agroalimentare toscano alla guerra in Ucraina* [*The exposure of the Tuscan agri-food system to the war in Ukraine*]. IRPET Note di lavoro. http://www.irpet.it/archives/62956

Fischler, C. (2001). *L'homnivore* [*The omnivore*]. Odile Jacob.

Ginanneschi, M. (2022a, June 15). *Trasformazione agroalimentare: "Industria gentile" e "obiettivo 25%" per il consumo di prodotti locali* [*Agri-food transformation: "Gentle industry" and "25% target" for the consumption of local products*]. Georgofili.info. https://www.georgofili.info/contenuti/trasformazione-agroalimentare-industria-gentile-e-obiettivo-25-per-il-consumo-di-prodotti-locali/21106

Ginanneschi, M. (2022b). I raccolti perduti degli Etruschi. Stato dell'arte e prospettive dei prodotti agroalimentari tradizionali [The lost crops of the Etruscans. State of the art and perspectives of traditional agri-food products]. *Alimenta, 2022*(1), 55–82. https://www.rivistalimenta.com/_files/ugd/0dc5bc_fa927785e4334483a71377ff6180c29d.pdf

Giuca, S. (2013). Understanding the short chain. In F. Giarè, & S. Giuca (Eds.), *Farmers and short chain: Legal profiles and socio-economic dynamics* (pp. 11–27). National Institute of Agricultural Economics (INEA).

ISMEA-Qualivita Foundation. (2021). *Rapporto ISMEA-Qualivita 2021: Sulle produzioni agroalimentari e vitivinicole italiane DOP, IGP e STG* [*ISMEA-Qualivita 2021 report on Italian PDO, PGI and TSG agri-food and wine production*]. Qualivita Foundation. https://qualivita.it/osservatorio/rapporto-ismea-qualivita/

Liberti, S. (2016). *I signori del cibo. Viaggio nell'industria alimentare che sta distruggendo il pianeta* [*The lords of food. Journey into the food industry that is destroying the planet*]. Minimum Fax.

Marsden, T., & Morley, A. (Eds.) (2014). *Sustainable food systems: Building a new paradigm.* Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203083499

Ramos-Niaves, V. (2021). Eat the rich: The parasitic relationship between socioeconomic groups as explored through film by Bong Joon-Ho's *Parasite* and *Snowpiercer*. *Digital Literature Review, 8*(1), 61–69. https://doi.org/10.33043/dlr.8.1.61-69

Román, S., Sánchez-Siles, L. M. & Siegrist, M. (2017). The importance of food naturalness for consumers: Results of a systematic review. *Trends in Food Science & Technology, 67,* 44–57. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tifs.2017.06.010

Ruhf, K. Z., & Clancy, K. (2022). *A regional imperative: The case for regional food systems.* Thomas A. Lyson Center for Civic Agriculture and Food Systems. https://doi.org/10.5304/lyson.2022.001

Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). *Nudge: Improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness.* Yale University Press.