Consumers' Attitude Toward Ethical Food: Evidence from Social Farming in Italy

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Abstract. Agriculture seems to be capable to foster rehabilitation, work integration and social inclusion of vulnerable people: persons with mental disabilities, people with burn out, long-term unemployed, individuals with an addiction history, and so on.

"Social farms", i.e. farms that provide these kind of services, are present in several European countries and their number is growing. The emerging interest of an increasing number of consumers for the "ethical quality" of products suggests that the social functions of these farms could be remunerated, although partially, by the market.

The paper discusses the issues mentioned above and focuses on some empirical evidence on consumers' beliefs and attitude about social farms' products. Data are collected through a survey based on interviews that focus on: the degree of knowledge and the general interest on the subject; the willingness to buy social farms' products and the conditions under which their purchase could be taken into consideration. More in details, the presence of significant differences in consumers' attitude and behavior are tested, and factors that affect such different demand segments are explored.

Keywords: Ethical Consumption, Social Farming, Consumers Buying Groups.

1. Introduction

Consumer demand for food is increasingly diversified and includes a wide range of attributes, among which ethical ones are emerging. The search for ethical characteristics tends to define consumers' lifestyles in specific market segments. Fair-trade, genetic modifications, environmental features and human rights are examples of aspects of food production that have become of concern to consumers. From the supply side, the ethical quality of production may represent a way to innovate and to improve farm produce competitiveness in the context of globalization [1].

An ethical dimension of agricultural activities, so far neglected, relates with the ability of farming to foster social and labor inclusion of vulnerable people such as persons with mental or psychiatric disabilities, people with burn out, long-term unemployed, individuals with an addiction history, former prisoners, and so on.

"Social farms", i.e. agricultural enterprises that employ, or simply involve in their activities, people with special needs, exist and operate in several European countries [2]. In Italy as well there are social farms that run agricultural activities to achieve both economic and social goals through the production of food. Although limited in numbers, social farms are receiving growing attention both by researchers and policy makers.

The emerging interest of an increasing number of consumers for the "ethical quality" of products suggests that the social functions of these farms could explicitly be remunerated by the market, at least to some extent. The success of "fair trade" products and of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) certifications, brings some evidence of the market potentials for social farms products [3] [4] [5].

Marketing the "ethical quality" requires the provision of information and guarantee, since this is a credence attribute that pertains to the production process and hence is not directly detectable by the consumer [6]. Information and assurance may be conveyed in different ways according to the market scale: i.e. through direct producer-consumer contact, or through labeling and certification in the wider market.

The paper is organized as follows. Section n. 2 briefly describes the activities undergone in social farms, their peculiarities and aims. Section n. 3 presents a discussion on how social farms products meet some of the new consumers' trends; furthermore different ways to market these products are explored. In section n. 4 some preliminary results of an empirical analysis are shown. Data are collected through a survey based on interviews with two types of consumers: persons belonging to informal consumer's buying groups and university students. The aim of the empirical analysis is to gain an overview on a relatively unexplored and innovative market area which could show interesting potentials. Some concluding remarks are presented in Section n. 5.

2. On social farming

The European debate on the multifunctional character of agriculture emphasizes services, positive externalities and public goods that agricultural production activities may generate. Within such debate, a recent attention is devoted to the actual and potential health and social role that on-farm activities may play for people with special needs [7] [8] [9].

'Social farming', 'Green Care Agriculture', 'Care Farming' are new expressions that refer to those programs and initiatives where agricultural farms are used to promote human mental and physical health and social well-being of vulnerable people.

The implementation of agricultural programs that aim to provide care and social inclusion is wide spread in many European countries [2]. The rapidly increasing trend of the "Care Farms" phenomenon in the Netherlands represents one of the most interesting example at country level [10].

In Italy the use of agriculture-related activities to provide therapy, rehabilitation and labour integration of vulnerable groups of people is well-known since decades. With the term vulnerable we refer to those people that the Italian law define “disadvantaged”: mentally challenged people, individuals with psychic disabilities, former drug addicts, prisoners, elders with dementia and so on. Through an active participation to agricultural production processes these persons may receive therapeutic and rehabilitative benefits and/or achieve work integration that labour markets generally fail to attain when people with special needs are concerned.

The Italian National Strategy Plan 2007-2013 for rural development mentions Social Farming, for the first time at this institutional level, as a case of agricultural diversification that should be fostered.

For the purposes of this study, among the wide variety of social farming initiatives that operate in Italy, “Social Cooperatives” deserve particular attention for this type of non-profit organizations are or should be, to a certain extent, market oriented and often sell their products directly to consumers.

According to the 2001 national survey performed by the National Institute of Statistics the number of social cooperatives that run agricultural activities is almost 450. Through these production activities they provide permanent work integration and social inclusion of some 5.000 disadvantaged people. They also might provide therapeutic and rehabilitative services for people with special needs that are host in the cooperative for a limited period of time.

Studies conducted in two regions - Latium and Tuscany - reveal [11] that social cooperative running agricultural farms, although very different one from the other, share some common features such as:

- a relevant diversification of cropping patterns. In order to achieve a constant and high involvement of people with limited capabilities and skills, a wide range of activities is generally performed; these often include, horticulture, floriculture, both in greenhouses and in open air, orchards, olive grove, small animal breeding, honey bee breeding. The production processes are conducted in a way that emphasizes the close relationship between individuals and plants or animals, they are highly labour intensive and can be carried on quite efficiently with accessible technologies.

- the adoption of organic methods of production. The assumption of a social responsibility comes together, almost ever, with an environmental responsibility. The use of chemicals or similar products in most cases is felt not coherent with the aims of the social enterprise and, moreover, safety reasons suggest to avoid these products when people with limited skills are involved in farm activities.

- the ‘open’ character of the farm. Many agricultural social coops have an on-farm shop where to sell their products; they often offer schools or families educational visits to the farm, organize at the farm meetings and public events .

3. Different ways to market social farm products

Product differentiation is a key factor for competitiveness in highly segmented food markets. Food consumption is more and more defined by different lifestyles. In the global markets the different consumption patterns are related to complex social factors that are quickly evolving [12].

Among the several quality attributes that affluent consumers consider more and more important there are some currently called ethical attributes [13]. Examples of the most frequently cited are: the respect of environment, the fulfilment of law requirements for workers safety, the general working conditions and the salary level, the issues related with working children, the fairness of the trade conditions, whether or not the manufacturer invests in the arms trade or has supported oppressive regimes, and so on.

As a consequence of a general wide attention on these issues, several terms such as: the Moral Economy, the Ethical Consumption, Anti-consumerism, Firms' Social Responsibility, Ethical Trade, Purchase of Moral Satisfaction, Ethical Finance, are gaining more and more attention in economics studies as well as in the political debate [14] [15] [16].

It is largely accepted that ethical consumerism is a complex phenomenon and that empirical surveys aren't always able to get its real dimension and features. It has been written that "ethical consumption is more celebrated than practiced" [13] and that there is a gap between the awareness on ethical issues among individuals as 'responsible' citizens and the actual action in their purchase behaviour as ethical consumers.

The food markets fully reflects these complex trends due to two main reasons: i) the relative low share of income spent for food, that makes it more feasible to pay for product differentiation and among others for social attributes ii) the high symbolic meaning of food implies that many ethical attributes are perceived as deeply connected with food [17]. In the last years the literature on ethical trade and ethical consumption has mostly focused on Fair Trade, organic production and genetic modifications.

With the aim to examine the potential market opportunities for food produced in social farms (hereafter SFF), the previous discussion makes it clear that it should be found out to what extent consumers that are sensible, on a general ground, to ethical issues could be interested in those products and could consider buying them. It is then essential to make some considerations on the conditions at which the market for SFF could exist and would succeed to create value for these products.

A first order of considerations pertains to some structural features of the majority of social farms (hereafter SF). Their economic dimension is, on average, small, and being multi-product farms the volume produced for each product is extremely limited. Moreover they are very few and scattered over the whole country, so that they hardly reach a wide visibility and reputation. Quite often they were not born as economic units nor do they have a proper management as economic enterprises. Now it is clear that the sum of these features makes it difficult for SF to reach distant markets with sufficient quantities; it is almost impossible for them to establish their own reputation; nor would they show price competitiveness, innovation capabilities, and so on.

Complex, long chains are not the right solutions for SF, while short chains seem to fit better . Farm retail shop is one possible solution and the more frequently adopted.

Differently from many non-agricultural production activities, the involvement in farming of people with limited capabilities usually does not prevent the possibility of producing high quality products. So, it is common for SF to sell their products and, considering that in general the quantities are limited, the sell them on a local scale directly to consumers.

The on-farm shop has a “multifunctional” role. It contributes to keep as higher as possible the economical value added of the sales, it induces people from the local community to enter the farm and get in touch with the activities run in the farm and with the people working there, it increases the self-esteem of the disadvantaged individuals who participate to the production process and can perceive the value of its final outcome through its sale.

The possibility to market the produce through on-farm shops faces some limitations : i) in case SF are too remote to be reached by a sufficient number of clients on a consuetudinary basis; ii) in case farm’s offer is not sufficiently diversified and constant over time to justify from the clients point of view the time necessary to go and shop.

One alternative solution could be to deliver those products directly to the consumers. This may have the advantage of adding a service to the product, increasing its value and the need of labour. Nevertheless, the organisation of this service is not trivial due to the extra need to coordinate and synchronize all the different steps of the activities (i.e. the pick-up of the products, their storage, the delivery itself, etc.). However the diffusion of internet and e-mail simplifies and reduces the costs of farm-client communication and represents an interesting opportunity, especially for less perishable products. In few cases products are sold through e-commerce. The best known example of online sales of SFF in Italy concerns the “Libera Terra” organization, a network of social cooperatives which operate in Southern Italy on farm land that has been confiscated from mafia.

As already stated before, and as it will be shown by the empirical analysis, an important point when selling products of social farms is to establish a direct contact between producers and clients. This is important with respect to the social function because it may strength the social function of farm activities; but it is also important for the clients who desire to know what the SF is doing, and who wants to be assured to be truly buying a social attribute. A direct contact with the SF is also important because it enforces the sense of moral satisfaction the consumer buys together with SFF.

One more retailing opportunity is to sell products in the short chain to the so called consumers’ buying groups. A consumer buying group (hereafter CBG) is a self-organised group of people - usually of about 10-30 families - who buy directly from producers, mainly, but not only, local producers. CBGs select farms, usually organic farms, and create a stable relationship with them, setting an agreement on quality, quantities, prices, deliveries, and so on. CBGs mainly buy food but there are groups that are also organised to buy non food products. Consumers buying groups often represent a way for individual consumers to organize together with other consumers part of their shopping to make it more coherent with their moral and social values. The phenomenon is spreading in many industrialised countries as part of the movement of the so called critical consumption or anti-consumerism [17] [18]; although it is impossible to have an exact measure of its dimension because it is in the philosophy of the groups, to tell with their own words, “not to be part of the system”, not to be used by multinationals or other strong economic powers that could see them as a new target market.

As it should be clear from the few features highlighted on the CBG, these consumers tend to be sensible to the ethical content of products and in particular they are interested in issues linked to environment, social justice and inclusion, income distribution, economic diversification and preservation of local, small firms [19]. Hence, the hypothesis of the paper is that they could be a very interesting starting point for SF that are willing to find a market niche to sell their products directly to the final consumer.

4. The empirical analysis

The empirical analysis is based on a field survey. During the period September 2005 - March 2006, 233 Italian consumers were interviewed, by means of a questionnaire[1]. Two different groups of consumers were selected for the interviews: university students (150) and persons belonging to CBGs (83)[2]. An explorative analysis had shown that among the entire Italian consumers’ population only very few were able to answer questions on social farming and related subjects, so that, in order to collect information on the actual and potential market for SFF, it was necessary to focus on selected targets of consumers. CBGs seemed a proper target for at least two important reasons. First, because they establish direct contact with farms and, as it has been said, this is an important aspect for social farming. Second, because, as it has been discussed above, CBGs are deeply involved in issues concerning ethics in the economy.

The second group of consumers interviewed was chosen following two criteria: i) to be significantly different from the previous one, in order to make it interesting to compare their knowledge, interest and attitude towards social farming and SSF. In particular, the aim was to choose a less peculiar group with respect to consumption habits and involvement in social issues; ii) to select a target of consumers who, in principle, could have a propensity to new and complex quality attributes. Due to age and culture, university students seemed an appropriate target.

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[1] Questionnaires were mostly sent by e-mail, some were given to the CBG coordinators that gave them to groups participants. The area covered by the interviews is wide but is not representative of the whole country. In particular the Southern regions are under represented (as shown in figure n.1) in the case of CBGs because their number is more limited in Southern regions, in case of university students because there are many students from Southern regions that choose Universities in different areas of the Country.

[2] It is worth noting that in the case of CBGs every single person interviewed represents not only himself, as a consumer, but its whole family.

Space limits make it impossible to give a comprehensive description of the personal characteristics of answering persons as well as of many of the information collected by the questionnaires. The two samples are shortly summarized and compared in table n.1.

Table.1. Dimension and Characteristics of the samples

	CBGs	university students
number of interviews	83	150
average family members	3	-
average age	40	24
percentage of females	45.7	52.7
percentage with university degree	62.6	-
percentage living in cities	45.0	53.7
percentage living in North Italy	56.3	21.5
percentage living in Central Italy	43.7	76.5

Source: data from direct interviews

In the following pages some evidences emerging by the survey are presented. Special focus will be on the following aspects: i) to what extent interviewed consumers buy SFF, what sort of products are bought, are consumers satisfied with this products, and so forth; ii) to what extent social farming is known at present within the target groups and which is their opinion on it; iii) to what extent people not buying SFF at present may show an interest for these produce and - in case - at what conditions they would be interested in buying them.

4.1. Consumers of social farms products

The survey revealed that about 11% of interviewed consumers has already tried social farm food (SFF). It is more frequent to find consumers of SFF within the CBGs than among university students: 18.1% versus 7.3%. Furthermore, among students, only 3.3% do buy these produce on purpose, and in many cases they do it on an occasional basis, in fairs or other occasional markets. This is the first evidence from the survey and it is the reason why the following discussion on SFF consumers will concentrate on CBGs.

About half (53%) of the SFF consumers belonging to CBGs started buying these products within the last two years, while the remaining half (47%) started before. These data suggest that there have been an extremely significant increase in the dimension of the market for these products in the very last years. Furthermore, data show that people who started buying SSF kept on buying them over time. Buying SFF is a lasting behaviour, though it is limited in importance: only 20% of SFF buyers spend for SFF more than one third of the total purchase made through CBG;

for 80% of them SFF is a quota of less than one third of total expenses made by the group. Probably, the reason for this is the limited range of products supplied by SF.

All these consumers know at least one social farm and almost half of them have been, at least once, directly in contact with one, whether or not for buying purposes.

Products bought in SFs are of many kinds and each consumer tends to buy more than one category among the following: fruits, vegetables, olive oil, wine, meat, eggs, cheese, salami, pasta, bread and fruit or vegetables preserves. Consumers affirmed to be 100% satisfied with these products: no one stated to be unsatisfied nor ceased to buy SFF.

The same indication of a comprehensive satisfaction could also be ascribed to the following finding: more than one third of SF customers (37,5%) said they pay for SFF more than for products of similar quality; another third said the relative price of SFF is different from case to case, whereas the remaining consumers find SFF less expensive.

Actually, the high quality of these products is relevant in the buying decision of 40% of consumers', though not so important as the ethical attributes: more than 90% said they have bought SFF for a sense of solidarity towards the farm and/or because they want to be "responsible consumers"[3].

To depict the profile of SFF buyers a different perspective was chosen, resulting from the comparison of SFF buyers and SFF non-buyers. To this purpose the questionnaires explored attitudes and behaviours such as volunteer activities, the habit to buy Fair Trade products, the habit to buy directly in farms shop, and the main concern of the interviewed as a consumer that could be related with the interest in SFF.

With reference to socio-economic variables, the survey reveals an overall similarity between the SFF buyers and non buyers. In particular, with respect to age, gender, degree of study, professional position, size of the town where they live, its geographical location - there are no statistically significant differences between the two sub-groups.

Differences emerged when considering their attitudes and behaviours related with the sense of social involvement and responsibility. Although in both groups the main motivation for having joined a CBG is related with a personal sense of social responsibility and solidarity, in the case of SFF buyers this motivation is more frequent: 73.3% versus 61.8%.
Secondly, SFF buyers and non-buyers differ with regard to their involvement in volunteer activities: 86.7% of SFF buyers do, or have done in the past, volunteer activities versus a share of 64.7% in SFF non-buyers. Moreover, there are differences, with regard to the incidence of what it has been declared to be their main worries as consumers. For almost everybody health concerns, environmental concerns and worries about social injustices are far more important than fears about personal welfare like the future level of savings or consumption. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that, with a share of 80%, issues on social justice are far more

[3] It was possible to select up to two options among the following: I buy SFF because: i) I feel solidarity with the people who carry on these activities; ii) I like the quality of the products; iii) I want to be a responsible consumer; iv) I trust these farms more; v) I find these products cheaper.

important for SFF buyers respective to 57% in the non buyers group in which, in turn, fears of food safety are more pervasive (61.8% versus 33%).

Some other important distinctive characteristics between SFF buyers and non buyers concern their buying behaviours. First, among the former 93.3% do buy Fair Trade products, while in the latter this share, though still high, is lower (79.4%). Second, among buyers of SFF is rare to find people with no contact at all with farms: 86% buys going directly to farms at least sometimes if not frequently. In the sub-group of SFF non-buyers this share is, approximately, one out of two. On the other hand, one out of two persons among SFF buyers avoid to go to Shopping Centres to do their food shopping while among SFF non buyers three persons out of four happen to go to Shopping Centres from time to time and one out of four goes there more than once a month.

These last evidences indicate that the two groups of consumers do differ in some important attitudes and matter-of-fact buying behaviours in the sense that SFF buyers show a set of habits coherent with a stronger and wider involvement in social issues, in producer-consumer relationship and for the sense of social responsibility involved in the consumer's choice.

4.2. The market for social farms product in perspective

This paragraph focuses on SFF non-buyers with the aim to give some highlights on the factors that are preventing them to buy these produce and to see if there could be a potential interest in the part of a segment of the interviewed. Both university students and people participating to CBGs are here considered and a comparison of the two groups is made.

Table.2. Non SFF buyers: a comparison between CBGs and university students

		CBGs	university students
	Knows and properly define social farming	22.1	17.2
Reasons for not buying SFF	do not know these products	73.5	80.7
	not interested in the topics	0.0	2.8
	unsatisfactory quality/price/availability	4.4	15.9
consider to buy SFF	consider to buy SFF in the future	60.3	82.1
	-if certified	17.6	19.3
	-if quality and diversification would be satisfactory	27.9	36.6
	-if more information would be available	58.8	57.9
main concerns as a consumer are	my future economic conditions	7.4	23.4
	that product could be harmful for my health	61.8	51.0
	pollution and waste of natural resources	54.4	39.3
	that economic organisation causes exclusion and injustice	57.4	35.2
	I do volunteer activities	64.7	37.9
	I buy FairTrade products	79.4	37.2
	I buy organic products	100.0	67.6

Source: data from direct interviews

Among people who have never bought or tasted SFF, 18.5% have heard about social farming before the interview and can correctly tell what it is about, confirming that we are dealing with a relatively unknown phenomenon even in consumers' segments that are sensible to ethical issues and to critical consumerism. Table n. 2 shows that in both groups only few persons already knew about social farming[4].

So that it should not be surprising that the lack of knowledge is also the main reason why these consumers never happen to think of buying them. When interviewed were asked to explain why they do not buy SFF, they said either that they never heard about these produce (42%) and/or that they do not know any social farm (59,3%). Hence, at the present moment, it can be said that the lack of knowledge is by far the main limiting factor for a market for SFF.

Factors like price, product availability and variety are not relevant as reasons preventing consumers from buying these products at the present stage, although these aspects, of course, are considered important when, at the next step of the questionnaire, the interviewed are asked on the conditions at which they would buy SFF.

[4] It is worth saying that, among students, there is a higher share who declared to have already heard about social farming but when asked to define what SF is, it emerged that they often confuse the term with more general statements about farms involvement in environmental responsibility and social justice.

Actually, almost none in both groups found himself totally uninterested in the topic while a significant share said they might consider to buy these produce in the future: 60% in the CBGs and 82% among students.

More in detail, they said that they would consider buying SFF in the future only if more information on the aims of these farms and on the social and productive activities they undertake would be provided.

This aspect is important in the opinion of many people (about 57-58%), more than, for instance, the number of those who would ask for a certification, that are only about 17-19%, or those who made considerations concerning convenience or price (27-36%)

It is worth noting that the two groups are significantly different with respect to several behaviours related to their involvement with ethical issues. When asked about what they mainly fear as consumers, students have selected, in a larger share, food safety (51%). Whereas, people in CBG are relatively more worried about environmental issues, social exclusion and injustice as a consequence of prevailing economic organisation. Consistently with these worries , within the CBG it emerged a higher share of people buying Fair Trade products (79.4% versus 37.2) and organic produce (100% versus 67.6%) and it also emerged a higher share of people devoted to volunteer activities (64.7% versus 37.9%).

5. Concluding remarks

The relevance of social farming is emerging in many European countries within the multifunctional role of agriculture. The produce sale represents a substantial aspect in social farming both for achieving their social goals and for improving the economic viability of the farm. The paper represents a first attempt to explore the attitude of specific segment of consumers toward the produce of social farms, considered as products with ethical attributes.

The survey has shown that CBGs are buying SFF in a higher share than we expected and that this phenomenon, though small, is highly dynamic [18].

SFF buyers that belong to CBGs appear to be characterised by an overall strong concern for ethical issues and for trying concretely to be responsible participants of the economic system: as a matter of fact they tend to be Fair Trade and organic products consumers and they often do volunteer activities.

With regard to the student sample, the survey revealed that the SF phenomenon is not fully ignored. The share of university students that were able to define in a reasonable correct way social farming is higher than expected and only slightly less than CBGs. Nevertheless, the great majority of them never heard neither of any social farm nor about their produce.

At the present stage, the survey indicates the lack of information as the main factor that limits the SFF market: many interviewed never heard of this activity and/or never happen to be in contact with a social farm and almost everyone said they would ask for more information as a condition to take into consideration to buy these produce. This result is consistent with the literature [12] that has stressed how information is an essential prerequisite in ethical consumerism to move from a generic expression of interest to concrete action.

Certification did not result from the survey as a relevant requisite for SFF marketing. This evidence is consistent with the economic literature that, on the one hand, indicates direct knowledge of the producers as a substitute of formal certifications for trust; and on the other hand consider the non profit character, that Italian social farms have, a guarantee in itself for actual and potential ethical consumers when asymmetric information is present [20] [21].
All the above mentioned characteristics suggest that CBGs should be seen as a privileged target for SFF products, having a positive opinion and an interest on social farms and on supporting their activities through the on-farm purchase of their products.

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