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**BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN FARMERS AND CONSUMERS:
VALUE CREATION AND MEDIATION IN “PASTURE-RAISED
BEEF” FOOD NETWORKS**

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore how different quality dimensions (safety, aesthetics, ethics and rooted ness) are created in food networks; how these qualities are transferred until the consumers; and how this process is supported by the organisation of the food network.

Our postulate is that combining the quality and organisation dimensions and exploring the link between them will provide an interesting perspective for improving the sharing of values in food networks.

This framework is applied to five case studies of “pasture-raised beef” food networks in France, representing a diversity of organisations such as public label scheme, cooperate owned brand and direct sell from farmer to consumer. The results highlight the importance of the role of certification and personal commitment for the creation, and also for the mediation of added-value.

Key words: Grassland, meat quality, sustainability, food labeling, case study

Introduction

Recently there has been a wealth of papers reviewing the emergence of “alternative” food networks and their diverse ways of attempting to reconfigure relationships between food producers and food consumers (Marsden et al. 2000; Sage 2003). Furthermore, short food chains, environmentally friendly production and consumption systems and other “alternative” food networks are seen as potentially more sustainable than the “mainstream” ones because of their focus on “quality”, “place” and “nature” (Goodman 2003). In their paper from 2006, Laura Venn et al. reported that they had found 56 published articles in the area of “alternative food networks” that included 140 empirical case studies (Venn et al. 2006). From this abundant literature emerge several questions that invite further research. Some of them relate to value communication and dialogue in food chains: for example: “At the same time, researchers should aim to analyse the process of meaning creation in food production, consumption and marketing, also evaluating how operations vary with changes in meaning” (Brunori et al. 2008); “methods for improved communication and sharing of values in global and long-distance food chains on the basis of negotiation between equal partners [should be investigated]” (Niggli et al. 2008).

In this paper we will explore the link between the organisation of the food network and the quality construction and mediation within the food network. This exploration is here

done in the context of the beef market, and especially the identified “pasture-raised beef”, where the meat comes from cattle that have been grazing, at least part of their life.

In comparison to “mainstream” meat, which comes from young bulls fattened indoors or culled dairy cows, “pasture beef” farmers can claim that their production systems have some added-values concerning animal welfare, rural landscape, environmental impact, meat flavour, and healthiness of the meat, depending on the characteristics of the farm and transformation practices. Meat-based food networks are characterised by the segmentation of the products that each actor works with: animal, carcass, muscle or meat cut. Each of these steps has its own features and its quality is appreciated in different ways. The quality of the final product depends on all of them. Our hypothesis is that it is an organisational challenge to link the qualities of each stage and for this to be reflected in the quality of the final product.

Methodology and theoretical framework

This study is based on a multiple case study analysis. We use a case study analysis because we think that we can learn from the diversity of food networks. A case study is a good tool for learning from real-life phenomena. (Yin 2003; Stake 2000)

The idea is not to directly compare the cases but to gather a diversity of the strategies in this context – investigating how particular organizations allow (or not) farmers to reveal and communicate the quality of their practices and of their products.

Case selection

Our criteria for selecting the food networks were:

- Diversity of distributors (butchers, restaurants, supermarket, catering, direct to consumer)
- With or without certification scheme
- Farmers owning or not the means of transformation (i.e. meat transformation plant)
- Collective or individual initiative

The case studies were not intended to be representatives of different types of food networks, but to illustrate the heterogeneity of the approaches encountered during the initial exploration. The selected cases claim a “special” quality of their products relating it, more or less explicitly, to grazing practices.

We concentrated our study in the centre of France and especially in the Allier department and neighboring areas. This region has the oldest Label Rouge certified beef food network and an important diversity of other food networks. In our search for more diversity we also chose two other food networks located in neighboring areas.

Data collection and processing

Information for the case studies was obtained in three main ways:

- Qualitative open-ended interviews of 22 stakeholders to gather an in-depth account of their experiences, conducted in February and March 2009. We asked questions about production, process, procurement and marketing practices, certification and regulations, communication and coordination among the actors. We did not interview consumers, but we interviewed actors in the chain who are in direct contact with consumers and we asked them about their perception of consumer demand. The interviews were conducted by the first author and, with three exceptions, were taped and transcribed.

- Analysis of documents

We gathered relevant documents from the organizations, especially documents for communication with customers, prices and services

- Observations

While doing the interviews we visited the firms and farms and developed the questions according to observations.

Those multiple sources of information were triangulated to reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation. Triangulation is usually used by qualitative caseworkers and is generally considered as “a process of using multiple perception to clarify meaning (...)” (Stake 2000).

The challenge of quality definition

Quality of meat includes both (1) the objective dimensions i.e. traits that can be measured on the samples and is dependant on the biological basis, but independent on the user this includes microbiological measurements, as well as colour and tenderness of the meat, and (2) the subjective dimension, based on the perceptions of the users i.e. their preferences, in terms of the value they attribute to various type of information (Edwards and Casabianca 1997). this includes consumer perceptions of the method by which the meat was produced and its perception of the flavour.

We had established a typology of the different quality dimensions based on literature (Brunori 2007; Niggli *et al.* 2008; Conner *et al.* 2008; Edwards and Casabianca 1997; Morris and Young 2000) that can be embedded in a beef meat product in a consumer perspective. These ranged from objective to subjective dimensions:

- Safety (sanitary quality, freshness)
- Health (presence of healthy micro-nutrients, fat)
- Aesthetics (flavour, juiciness, tenderness)
- Ethics (animal welfare, pollution, landscape, supporting family farming)
- Rooted ness (connection to traditions, culture, the food is produced by someone, somewhere)

This framework has been used for analysing quality creation and mediation in the case studies.

Brief presentation of the cases

Case A: Label Rouge Charolais du Bourbonnais

About 130 farmers own a cooperative slaughterhouse and meat-processing plant. They supply mainly butchers, but also restaurants. The beef is sold under a Label Rouge, which is the name of a collective mark owned by the French Ministry of Agriculture. The Label Rouge guarantees a superior quality of the final product in terms of flavor in comparison to standard meat. They also got the European PGI (Protected Geographical Indication) label which is the European mark for foods that are authentically linked to the area where they are produced.

Case B: Supermarket Label

This is a certification scheme initiated by one of the biggest French supermarket chains in 1996. They work together with farmers' cooperatives in different French regions. They require a "traditional" way of production with several months of pasture for the animals. The production and process requirements are controlled by an independent control firm.

Case C: Nature park certification

This is a cooperative of 42 farmers producing Salers beef in a mountainous area of the Massif Central. They have their own meat processing facilities, employ a butcher and sell their vacuum packed products to restaurants and private households. They use the regional nature park trademark. This means that farmers have to comply with requirements for environmental and landscape friendly production systems. The region is touristic, with typical landscapes.

Case D: Farmers' collective shop

This is a farmers' shop which opened in 2002. Ten farmers of the region sell their products in the form of vegetables, wine, cheese, meat, etc. The farmers commit to be themselves present at the shop. One of the farmers has beef cattle on grass and employs a butcher for the carving. The shop sells around an equivalent of half a beef carcass per month.

Case E: Farm box scheme

This is an 110-ha farm with suckler cows of the Charolais breed. The animals are slaughtered at a slaughterhouse and the carcasses are then sent to a meat processing plant where they are cut and packed. The meat is delivered by the farmer to private households in big cities and in his region.

Results and discussion

What is quality to the consumers? Perceptions of the other food network actors.

Asking the actors about their perception of consumer requirements, we got the following results: tenderness is the most frequent requirement of consumers; sanitary safety is often taken as given; but, following the BSE crisis, there are still preoccupations with what the cattle have been fed. Concerning flavor, there is a broad diversity of consumer preferences; some prefer a strong taste while others prefer a mild one, but it is an important feature for all. Regarding production conditions the fact that the animals can go outside is considered as very positive. Some consumers also look for a direct contact with the farm or the farmer and also for a product “story” that they can relate to.

Of the five quality dimensions defined in the Methodology section, the healthiness of the product (micronutrients and fat content) was the only dimension never mentioned by the interviewees.

How do qualities emerge from the practices and conventions of the food network? (Figure 1)

In terms of quality creation, we can observe that there is a large diversity between the five cases:

The Label Rouge CB, focuses the efforts of the actors on aesthetical aspects, involving farmers and meat processing practices, especially a long dry aging on bones.

The supermarket label focuses on farm practices. The meat processing practices, aging and carving, don't give any added-value because they are similar to the mainstream meat production.

For the nature park label, the certification focuses on the regional identity and environmental considerations. However the practices responsible for flavour, which have emerged from the negotiation between the partners, make it an important feature of this food network.

Figure 1 - Practices for adding value to the product and actors involved in the creation of these values

		Label Rouge CB	Supermarket Label	Nature park label	Farmers' shop	Farmer Box scheme	Who is involved?
Safety							
Traceability		RR	RR	RR	RR	RR	All
Microbiological		RR	RR	RR	RR	RR	All
Long-term potential effect on health or environment	Limited list of allowed/forbidden feedstuffs	RR++	RR+	RR	RR	RR	Farmers
	Limited medicine intake of the animals	RR+	RR+	RR	RR	RR	Farmers
	GMO in the feedstuff	discussed	nm.	<i>Forbidden</i>	Not using	Not using	Farmers
Aesthetics							
Tenderness:	Maximum age of the animal	<i>96 months</i> <i>Yes</i>	<i>144 months</i> <i>Yes</i>	120 months nm.	70 months nm.	? Young nm.	Farmers
	Reduced stress of animal						Farmers + transport
	Minimum aging on bone	<i>10 days</i>	<i>7 days</i>	Adapting	Adapting	14 days	Abattoir /meat processing.
Butcher adapting to the diversity for cutting	Butcher adapting to the diversity for cutting	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Distributors
	Breed	<i>Charolais</i>	<i>Charolais</i>	<i>Salers</i>	Limousine	Charolais	Farmers
	Minimum age of the animal	<i>28 months</i>	<i>28 months</i>	26 months	16 months	16 months	Farmers
	Pasture based alimentation	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	Farmers
Aging of the carcass on bone	Aging of the carcass on bone	<i>Yes</i>	nm.	Yes	Yes	<i>Yes</i>	Abattoir/meat processing
	Providing cooking advice to the consumers						Distributors
Color	Selection of carcass by color	<i>Yes</i>	No	No	No	No	Abattoir/ meat processing

Italics: indicates that the feature is mandatory in the food network (certification)

nm: Not mentioned

RR : Respect official Rules and legislation

+ : further rule, added to the requirements of the certification scheme

		Label Rouge CB	Supermarket Label	Nature park label	Farmers' shop	Farmer Box scheme	Who is involved?
Ethics							
Animal welfare		<i>RR++</i>	<i>RR++</i>	<i>RR++</i>	<i>RR+</i>	<i>RR+</i>	Farmers + transport
Limit negative environmental impact	Limit polluting emissions Respect biodiversity Recycling	<i>RR</i>	<i>RR</i>	<i>RR++</i> ++++ +	<i>RR</i>	<i>RR</i>	Farmers Farmers Farmers
Care of landscape		Care hedges	nm	+++	nm	Care hedges	Farmers
Rootedness							
Regional identity	Region of production identified	<i>Yes</i>	No	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	Yes	All
	Region of process identified	<i>Yes</i>	No	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	Yes	
	Local consumption	No	No	Partly	<i>Yes</i>	Partly	
"Traditional" practices	Reference to the history of the farming activity and handicraft	Yes	Few	Yes	Yes	Yes	All

Italics: indicates that the feature is mandatory in the food network (certification)

nm: Not mentioned

RR : Respect official Rules and legislation

+ : further rule, added to the requirements of the certification scheme

The two food networks working with direct sale between farmer and consumer are mainly selling young bulls of age 16 to 24 months, which are supposed to give a milder taste but very tender product.

It is also interesting to note that at the beginning of four of these food networks (excluding the nature park label) you can almost have the same animal, from the same farm. At the end you can end up with very different product attributes because of the processing practices and the organisation of the food network.

A farmer delivering animals to case B, case E and to a food network similar to case A (fcE):

“For me they [my animals] don’t have a different quality: the animals are from the same group, have been fed in the same way, with the same feedstuff and have more or less the same shape. I think the quality of the meat in relation to tenderness and flavour is achieved by the aging on bones. That is the critics I make towards one of these food chains...”

Most of the quality dimensions identified - safety, aesthetics, and rootedness - implicate several actors of the food network, from farm to distributor. Each quality can only be realised if all actors contribute to it. This coordination for the creation of quality is realised through a negotiation between the actors, for example, about the method chosen for aging the meat. The result of the negotiation is either formalised by a certification or just part of a business relationship based on stability and trust.

Ethical qualities such as animal welfare and limited environmental impact were only related to farm practices and did not involve the other actors. They were in general not considered important qualities to develop compared to aesthetical or rootedness qualities, although, some farmers would like to transfer these qualities to the consumer.

Transmission of the values embedded at farm level along the chain and to consumers

In the five food networks presented here, we found that the values embedded at farm level are transmitted to the consumers in two main ways (Figure 2):

- a direct farmer-consumer contact where there is a possible discussion between farmers and consumers
- through posters showing some aspects of the farm/animals. This communication is allowed by the certification. It does not need the involvement of the meat processing/sales actors.

Communication by other actors, like restaurants and butchers rarely takes place. We found two reasons for that:

- they communicate mainly about their work, the choice of the pieces, and the preparation for the restaurants.

- in general there is a lack of knowledge of butcher and chefs about what is happening on the farm

Butcher (b1cA): *“What I want is that farmers raise their animals as they want. What I want is to have good merchandise. (...) How farmers raise their animals, what the animals eat, I don’t know...”*

In the “nature park label” food network, restaurants’ chefs sometimes talk about the animals and the farms because there is a real demand from the tourists, but it seems that it remains a cliché rather than information:

Cook (r2cC): *“[When the clients ask] I say: it comes from animals like this beautiful cow; we have a nice picture, there”*

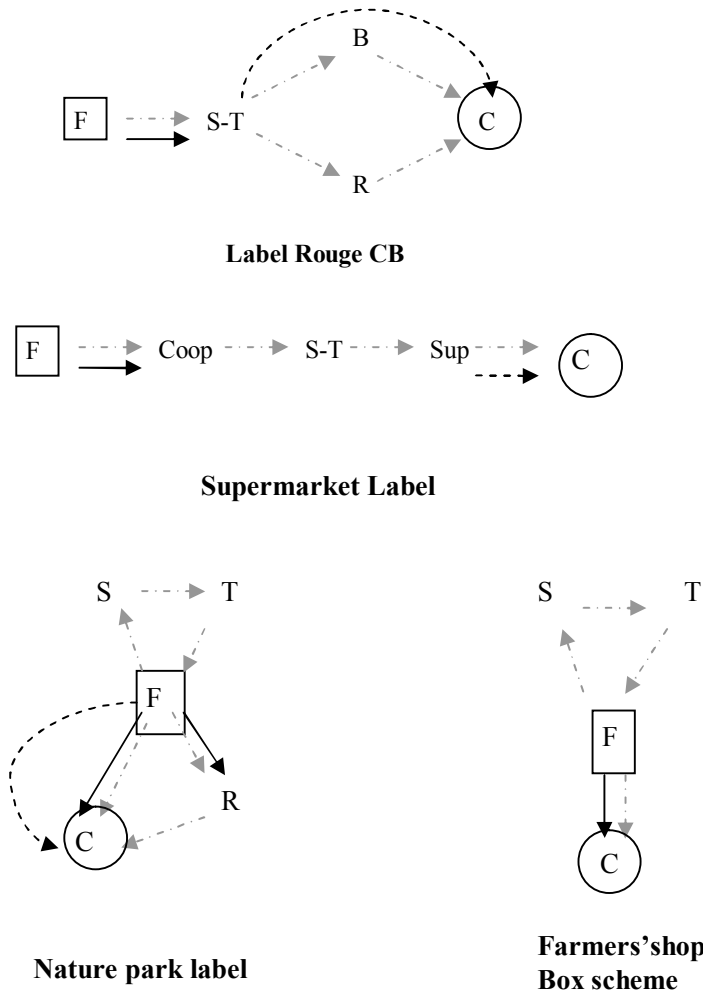
This lack of knowledge/interest has been identified in the Label Rouge CB case, and the farmers’ cooperative is about to organize farm visits for the butchers.

The importance of the type of distributors

From the four selection criteria, the variety of the distributors turned out to be very important in the choice and transfer of quality:

- Butchers and restaurants focus on the flavor and tenderness for their consumers and lack knowledge about farms and animals production.
- Direct farmers/consumers sales enable a communication by the farmer about the conditions of production on farm and the locality.
- In the supermarket case we observed an efficient communication about farm practices through certification. But in comparison to the other food networks, the more “industrial” processing practices don’t convey as much added-value.

Figure 2 - Sharing of knowledge about the specificity of farm practices and their potential added-values



F: Farmer(s) - Coop: Cooperative S: Slaughterhouse - T: Meat processing plant - B: Butcher -
R: Restaurant - Sup: Supermarket - C: consumer

-----> Product flow
——> Sharing of knowledge about the specificity of farming practices and their potential added-values through direct contact
-----> Sharing of knowledge about the specificity of farming practices and their potential added-values with posters and advertising material through certification

Concluding remarks

Because some of the values are created by a contribution of several actors of the food network (such as the aesthetical ones), creation and mediation of these values are closely linked. Institutionally-based certification is a way of formalizing this link but stable, inter-personal relationships are also used in some food networks.

Qualities that are exclusively created at farm level (in these cases, ethical qualities) are transmitted directly from the farmer to the consumer either by direct contact or through posters, which are made possible by certification. The involvement of other actors in mediating “farm only” based qualities is limited. However actions to this end are undertaken.

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