Bringing organic food home: Possibilities and constraints of transmitting experiences with organic food in the out of home sector to the overall food market

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Abstract - The point of departure for this paper is the observation that in spite of the public measures taken in order to increase the use of organic food in the out of home eating sector (the catering sector), there is little evidence that this sector has contributed to an overall increase in consumption of organic food. Our aim with this paper is not to discuss whether this is the case or not, but with an open mind we want to point at some factors or mechanisms that may explain the (lack of) connections between consumption of food within and outside of the home.

INTRODUCTION

Two important assumptions that lay behind the support for organic food in the out of home eating sector are:
Consumers’ experiences with organic food in an out of home context will increase their knowledge, and this will in turn have an effect on the use of organic food at home.
The demand for organic food in the catering sector will lead to increased production of organic food. This will in turn increase the availability and lower the prices of organic products in the retail sector.

We will discuss these assumptions further with reference mainly to the Norwegian context. The Norwegian agricultural authority (SLF) has for several years supported the conversion to organic food within different catering institutions and businesses. The first national pilot project was established in 2002 at the St. Olavs Hospital in Trondheim. Today SLF not only supports conversion at public institutions such as hospitals, but also canteens at work places, schools and food services at music festivals and sports events. Two clearly expressed aims with these measures are on the one hand to establish new market channels for organic products and on the other hand stimulate the overall market for organic food. We may also presume that the authorities have considered that these projects will have an effect on consumers’ perceptions and use of organic food. The SLF-measures include grants for information, under which the support for festivals and sports events is sorted. The organic label, ‘Ø-merket’, is well exposed at these events and festivals, and the reports from these projects stress a number of information measures taken within the different projects (SLF 2005).

INFORMATION AND CHANGING CONSUMPTION

One common understanding or rationale behind the use of such information measures is that consumers’ may change their consumption habits in a more sustainable direction when exposed for relevant and well targeted information. With references to some theoretical contributions and recent research in the field of environmental sociology we will stress that the effects of information always are related to the specific social context that are framing consumer practices (Shove 2003, Vittersø 2003). Social norms, habits, expectations and social relations between family members are all factors that constitute the complex context of the ordinary consumption in everyday life. These factors also explain why household practices are difficult to change. However some findings suggest that information that is embedded in close social networks such as between colleagues at work or between the school and home are more trusted and effective than more socially disembedded information systems such as governmental information campaigns or product information and labels (Vittersø 2003).

TRANSMITTING EXPERIENCES FROM OUT OF HOME TO EVERYDAY LIFE

This may imply that experiences with food served at a canteen at school or at a work site may have a grater potential for affecting consumption (Ross 2000), than food served at a festival or in a restaurant. The point here is that consumers experience food in different ways depending on the context. There is a whole range of different factors in a food serving situation that affect the consumers’ possibilities to transmit these experiences into an everyday context. We will here mention a few important factors both on the level of the product as well as on an organisational level: The products which you receive in a food service setting such as a restaurant, canteen or fast food bar is usually ready prepared and come as a full menu. As consumer you miss out on the crucial steps of purchasing and preparing the...
meal. You therefore know little about the ingredients, the price and where to purchase the products you are served, unless you have the opportunity to ask the chef or other special information is included in the food service. In the public setting the menus are already decided and as a customer you have little influence. Besides, eating at restaurants have usually fewer or at least other moral constraints than eating dinner at home (Bugge & Døving 2000, Miller 1998, Ward & Martens 1998).

**TRANSMITTING EXPERIENCES FROM CATERING TO RETAILING**

Likewise we ask to what extent there are links between the catering sector as a market channel and the retail sector? In recent years we have seen a range of research studies pointing at the differences between conventional and organic food products and the distribution and marketing of these products. Some of these contributions have pointed to the fact that organic food products in many ways do not fit into the standardised retail system, and we have also seen a development towards a ‘conventionalisation’ of organic food in order to reach a broader market. To avoid a further conventionalisation there have been suggested to develop alternative market channels for organic food, including the catering sector. However, what several of these studies have shown is that an experience with distribution of organic food in one context is hard to transmit to another context. This is partly due to the fact that ‘conventional’ and ‘alternative’ distribution systems are influenced by different sets of conventions regarding how to value and qualify food products, as well as how to handle, distribute and marketing the products. Even between small, local organic food initiatives the contexts are so different that it may be hard to transmit specific experiences from one to another, and within successful initiatives we usually find quite unique and special mixes of social conventions among the actors involved (Vittersø et al. 2005). While increased demand for organic products in the catering sector is likely to increase the volume and range of products in general, it is not obvious that these products will find their way to the conventional market. Within the catering sector one often have quite special demands regarding quality, food preparation and packaging. While visible appearance of produce is most essential in the retail store, this is not vital for products that are prepared in an institutional kitchen. Speaking of distribution, in a situation with limited production of organic food, there may even be a direct competition in getting hold of the products between different market channels.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Finally, we would like to stress that the aim of this paper has been to question the possibilities and limitations of transmitting experiences between different social contexts. We believe that it is necessary to study these issues further, and that the questions brought about in this paper are essential in understanding the development of the market for and consumption of organic food. This paper is worked out in parallel with an application for the Norwegian Research Council to facilitate an empirical research study of the relations between organic food served at festivals and institutional kitchens and the effects on consumption of organic food at home.

**REFERENCES**


