

FOOD DEMOCRACY: QUALITY FOOD TO THE PEOPLE!

“There is a story behind our food. [...] it ought to be a story that makes us proud. Sadly, most of the food we eat has a story behind it that we would be ashamed to tell...”¹

There is an old saying that we are what we eat. But do we actually know what we eat. If we do not know how do we then know what makes us human beings. After watching the videoprojection “Our Daily Bread” by Nikolaus Geyrhalter we come to think of it: “Are we human at all?”

A wild animal hunts for food and takes from the natural environment just as much as it needs for its survival and normal functioning. Our food industry is, however, occupied with producing more and more food - faster and faster. As if the quality would not be an issue and unequal distribution of food also does not make it human. So the question that needs to be asked is: “How can we humanize our food industry and establish food democracy?”

English dictionary states that democracy is »a form of government in which the people freely elect representatives to govern them«; therefore, in the food democracy we would be free to elect what kind of food we want to influence our well-being, our mood and our

thoughts. Not only is there important to eat food that is produced according to the quality standards it is also important that the food is produced locally as this enables the quality of food, jobs, development and preservation of the local community. We, the people, need to get more involved in the production, distribution and consumption of food.

What can we improve in food industry?

First, of all, we, the people need to vote for food that nourishes body and mind and is healthy with vitamins and at the same time produced in fair conditions. “Since 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has bankrupted much of the rural Mexico, driving over two million smallholders out of the countryside”² Two million! That is the whole nation of Slovenia. People lost their daily bread as they were not able to compete with multinational corporations that benefited from U.S. subsidies. “From 1997-2005, the NAFTA supported corn and soybean subsidies to the U.S. based Smithfield, the world’s largest producer of pork, allowing them to sell their products 10% below market price. Mexico saw corn imports quintuple from their levels in the early 1990s and soybean imports jumped more than 150%.”³ Mexican hog, soy and corn farmers could not keep up with big American

companies on the market. “In a recent statement the international peasant movement La Via Campesina with GRAIN, the FoodFirst Information and Action Network agree with farmer’s and indigenous peoples organizations, social movements and civil society groups that we need to: (1) Keep land in the hands of local communities and implement genuine agrarian reform in order to ensure equitable access to land and natural resources; (2) heavily support agro-ecological peasant, smallholder farming, fishing and pastoralism, including participatory research and training programmes so that small-scale food providers can produce ample, healthy and safe food for everybody; (3) Overhaul farm and trade policies to embrace food sovereignty and support local and regional markets that people can participate in and benefit from; (4) Promote community-oriented food and farming systems hinged on local people’s control over land, water and biodiversity. Enforce strict mandatory regulations that curb the access of corporations and other powerful actors to agricultural, coastal and grazing lands, forests and wetlands.”⁴

What is the mission of food democracy?

Freedom is grounded in responsibility. There has been great interest in the academic arena for sustainability from the

first »1972 UN Stockholm meeting on the environment, UNCED report Our Common Future in 1986«⁵, which introduced the term sustainable development and that made it essential to be able to detect the mechanisms that offer the proper incentives to incorporate sustainability into food management. Management is embedded into the broader framework of business community, society and nature. Sustainability as a term has its roots in the concept of sustainable development, associated with the final report of the World Commission for Environment and Development, the so called Bruntland report, under the auspices of the United Nations, and published under the phrase »Our common future«. According to that document, the term sustainable development refers to: »Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable, to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.«⁶

Consideration of future generations »bounds the behavior of contemporary leaders to act within the limits of the nature to regenerate and provide social and business opportunities for future generations to be able to have a decent life-style.«⁷ United Nations 2002 resolution designated the period 2005-2014 as »the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development«⁸

and highlighted that education for sustainable development needs to provide specific skills such as learning to know, to live together, to do and to be.

Key sustainable principles are in the system of »ecology, society and economy. «⁹ Sustainability is defined as »humans surviving indefinitely into the future with an acceptable quality in life«¹⁰ of which food is an integral part. The three dimensions of sustainability: “ecological, economic and social development”¹¹ are equally important to food democracy.

Data gathered in Full Professor’s Vlado Dimovski's research group “Local food supply: benchmarking analysis and recommendations” evokes concern due to the low level of local food supply. Statistical data shows that Slovenia has the highest level of food supply at animal products (eggs and meat) and the lowest level at vegetables; the level is also low at products that are of strategical value for basic nutrition of people (wheat and potatoes).

In the years 2000 - 2010 the level of local supply of vegetables has decreased the most, despite the fact that growing vegetables can be profitable even for smaller farms, which represent the majority of Slovene farms. It is possible to presume that low local vegetable supply is the consequence of uncertain take away of products under reasonable prices at

the time of product maturity, which is very important in vegetable growing as these products quickly loose on quality and value, that is why farms have switched to cattle-breeding and other products where risk of uncertain take away is lower or not present at all.

In order to critically answer the main daunting question and establish food democracy this leads us to answering the following question that takes us into the local environment, that in my case is Slovenia, therefore, in the next section We analyze the possibilities for food democracy in Slovenia and then spread again attention to the methodology of appreciative inquiry that we propose as a mechanism that can enable global food democracy.

What can we do to raise the level of local food supply?

First of all, we must organize the agricultural market in a way that there is no risk of untimely take away of products at economically sound prices. That is how the production of local food will become interesting for local farmers. Looking long-term, strategical measures must be taken to provide for an optimal growth of local food supply. Since Slovenia does not have enough available agricultural ground for total local food supply it is necessary to develop a strategy of local food supply by

stating the goals for each food product. Goals must be set in a way that they maximize the level of local food supply for those products where local production – due to short food chain from the field to the table – has considerable advantage in higher nutrition value (e.g. vegetable) and strategical value (wheat for making »our daily« bread, potatoes).

For optimal usage of available agricultural ground we need to add to the existing land register list of recommended plants, for which on a specific location, according to the climate conditions and other conditions, optimal income can be gained in accordance with sustainable farming. For individual products and locations by taking into consideration the difficulty of farming area economically sound take away prices need to be designed so the agricultural ground will be optimally used. According to the location, the take away prices need to be set in a way that the production of food for people (such as vegetables) in lower areas will be economically more interesting than cattle-breeding. That way the amount of food for people will increase and stock-farming will be strengthened in higher territories that are not suitable for vegetables but enable growing cattle of higher quality.

An interesting project of locally grown vegetables is a brand Lušt tomato that is

grown in a lower region of Slovenia with the highest level of unemployment and very good conditions for agriculture. A group of three investors »by investing 7 million euro increased the level of local supply of tomatoes in Slovenia for about 13% and intend to produce 2000 tons tomatoes, annually.«¹²

Organic farming is an agricultural practice that is the most human and environmentally friendly and its main goals are protection, sustaining natural resources, well-being of animals, production of healthy food products and sustainable development of the countryside where sustainability is defined as the foundation of organic farming and its advantages are: “protection of the environment, sustaining of unrenovable sources, better quality of food, reduction of food surpluses and redirection of agriculture to the needs of the customers.”¹³ Organic farming started to develop in Slovenia 20 years and is present mostly in agricultural extensive areas, whereas agriculturally preferable areas are dedicated to intensive and conventional agricultural usage.

In order to increase organic farming (critical analysis was done for the case of »Slovenia«¹⁴ but could be transferred to many other countries, appropriately): (1) subvention system needs to be changed in a way that it stimulates production of market-

interesting food and strengthen the awareness and knowledge transfer between producers (conventional and organic); (2) increase a very low share of Slovene organic food products in the whole distribution of organic products (challenging structure of territory and minimal production for the market); (3) sales of organically grown products need to be broadly available and not just the way they are now mostly at farms or in the modest number (13 in 2012) of organic markets; (4) high prices of organic products need to lower with the economy of scale (on average they are 80% higher than conventionally grown products); (5) sales trend needs to move in the direction of web sales channels, partnership farming and connection of organically grown products with wellness resorts and public organizations such as educational institutions; (6) develop organical farming in western and southwestern part of Slovenia; (7) strengthen beside cattle-breeding farms also organically grown vegetables and fruit that are more work intensive and demanding; (8) younger, well-educated people need to have a bigger role in organical farming; (9) intensify scientific research of organical farming that due to late development of organic farming is not well developed; (10) Slovenia belongs together with Denmark, the Netherlands, Hungary, France, Finland

and Latvia among countries for which a slow growth of organic farming is expected.

How can we design the transformation to food democracy?

Action research states that researchers are “part of the transformation process while doing the research.”¹⁵ Lewin constructed the term action as “a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting.”¹⁶ Zuber-Skerritt defines action research, action learning and process management (ALARPM) in its multifunctionality »as philosophy, theory of learning and methodology, method and technique that is closely connected with action learning as an international field«¹⁷ dealing with learning as a process of gaining new insight and implementation of the gained knowledge into practice. Action researcher is obliged due to the validity of his action research to provide information for recoverable research process, with stating the epistemology – the ideas and the process in which they were integrated, and to define what is considered as acquired knowledge as the »action researcher is responsible for stating when the action research is completed and enough knowledge was gathered«¹⁸

»Appreciative inquiry«¹⁹ as a subset of appreciative action research is suitable for

stimulating creativity in contemporary food industry.

»Methodologically and theoretically«²⁰ it incorporates food democracy in four stages: (1) *Appreciation (Discovery phase)* means investigation into the positive core of the food industry, its production, distribution, consumption and its symbiotic functioning. Stated research question: How to design the transformation to food democracy? stimulates the appreciative inquiry research and learning into enhancing the creativity by: (2) *Visualization of results (Dream phase)* that is the process of envisioning future desired vision of the food industry with participation of all the stakeholders; (3) *Co-construction (Design phase)* is the articulation of practices and means to achieve the desired vision of food democracy; (4) *Sustaining action (Destiny phase)* means creating systematic means that empower, enable sustainable life-long learning, improvisation and constant renewal of food democracy.

Teaching innovation: Rethink food management into food democracy initiative

Social innovation causes the change of the system. Social innovators (e.g. such as Slovene society Mladinski ceh) put in the centre of attention “a human being and his feelings towards things.”²¹

In order to build food democracy: (1) analysis and collection of data through interviews needs to be carried out with all the stakeholders; (2) challenge needs to be internalized (the solution seekers need to see the challenge through the eyes of final food producer/distributor/consumer); (3) we need to redefine the problem (where is an actual challenge and look behind and beyond); (4) ideation (wide specter of possible solutions); (5) feedback and reflection with stakeholders; (6) design of a prototype; and gain (7) feedback and reflection from the wide range of stakeholders.

Rethinking means rethinking all aspects of life, however, so far it was focused on relationship towards environment and lately shifted its focus also to current social problems (e.g. such as high youth unemployment). We see opportunities in rethinking the role of youth in food industry – it is so basic yet we often neglect to think of it, responsibly. We propose that an aspect of rethink initiative could also be in strengthening the role of rethinkers in food industry.

Rethinking food industry means that we do not take it for granted where our food comes from and trust unconditionally food producers and distributors. We need to take a responsible attitude towards food. Food democracy demand responsible consumers,

distributers and producers as we are all part of the same system and incomplete one without the other. If producers have secure take away they can produce quality food without having to take shortcuts in the process. On the other hand, consumers need to raise awareness and low price must not jeopardize the food quality. Producers need to get respectful payment for their effort; therefore, food distributers and big food chains need to be showed respect by consumers' attitude of buying from stores that have demonstrated their social and environmental responsibility.

Case study approach: Am I a food democrat?! or »Food that makes me«

Judita Peterlin is the great granddaughter of a true food democrat Taša who loved her land, sustainable farming, creative kitchen, bread making, and home food. And Taša was successful in passing on that love on her son Ivan, her three granddaughters Anita, Marija & Judita, two grandsons Ivo & Tonček, seven great grandsons Urban, Jure, Anže, Uroš, Jaka, Aljaž & Blaž and four great granddaughters Irenca, Judita, Staša & Marjanca. What the coauthor remembers most about her upbringing are family gatherings that were full of inviting smell as there was always present... home-made food and through it Taša – who lived on in her recipes. The author is positive that Taša

smiles from food heaven and is happy to share one special recipe also with the wider community that honors food democracy.

What makes the recipe for her cake that the author named »*slo. Tašine – eng. Taša's cake*« so special is the long journey full of love this more than 100-year-old recipe made in a letter from a small town in Slovenia in order to comfort home-sickness of her sister Antonija in the United States of America where she moved in the beginning of the 20th century in order to secure a better future for herself. But what she found was lack of food democracy and longed for the love that home-made Taša's cake had as a special ingredient. And to comfort her sister as best as she could Taša send Antonija her recipe for the cake that produced a sense of home and the author found it 60 years later after cleaning Antonija's attic in a box full of letters and moreover...in a moment when she craved for home.

Emotional, spiritual and logical conclusion is that the key to the success of the cake is also in fresh and locally produced ingredients, therefore, the author invites the readers to head on a journey to local producers in their community before heading into kitchen and preparing the cake. It will taste much better as you will know and sense which hands crushed the grains

before your hands bake them. It's time to move from words to action:

TAŠA'S CAKE

INGREDIENTS:

0,5 kilogram of locally produced flour*

0,2 kilogram of locally produced sugar

0,375 liter of locally produced milk

*3 tablespoons** of locally produced honey*

1 teaspoon of locally grown herbs (if not produced: zimt can be used)

scrape the skin of one ecologically grown lemon

half of baking powder

1 teaspoon of baking soda / sodium bicarbonate

locally grown nuts

PREPARATION:

Mix well all the ingredients together and after that place dough in well greased pan or a pan covered with waxed paper. Even the dough and sprinkle it with nuts (walnuts, hazelnuts or peanuts). Put the pastry into a hot oven. Bake until toothpick inserted in cake comes out clean.

Bon appetite and long live food democracy!

**1 kilogram.....2.205 pounds*

***1 tablespoon.....15 milliliters*

Action research of food democracy: Empirical evidence for “Am I a food democrat?”

Judita Peterlin participated in the empirical part of the paper by critically evaluating her role in the food production, distribution and consumption: “I love local food and action research is my favorite research approach as “it begins with the issues and concerns within some practical situation, with which

the action researcher interacts, therefore action research should both answer a research question and fulfill a practical need.”²²

My research into my own relationship towards food democracy started spontaneously as all best things usually happen to me. I started thinking and writing as this is also what I usually do. But then I thought of my great grandma’s recipe and first just wanted to add a photo of the final dessert. But no, that is not the point of food democracy, that is what I am used to and what we get in all the beautiful magazines around the world that deal with food and recipes. It looks so beautiful that it is intimidating sometimes as it seems as though supermoms are cooking in other kitchens. Well, I decided to go on a trip and collect all the ingredients for my Taša’s cake locally as it used to be done. In a way I moved forward into the food democracy but at the same time travelled back in time. Kind of strange feeling - but lots of fun. I decided to photo document everything as I saw in one research camp with society Morigenos where we took photos and photos, well lots of photos of the dolphins that to me seemed all the same, but of course they were so different to the expert’s eye. As food ingredients seem so different to me in comparing local ones with the ones bought in supermarkets.

i@NUTS - My first photo session was of our family's walnut in front of the house. And then of walnuts that are drying in the cellar. I have not noticed it before but the walnut has such a beautiful green color wrapping, have you noticed it? And how beautiful it is when it is still small and green, so tenderly looking. I did not like it when it was still in blossom as I had to clean the patio all the time and it was also slippery and left stains on the stoned pavement. But how tasty it will be when it ripens into a delicious walnut. Cannot wait! The nuts used in the cake are from last year and because the squirrels were faster there was only a few for us to chew on.

i@HERB - The second photo star was my Herb! Or I should say herbs as I like them a lot and always pick many of them in our garden; I picked tarragon (my favorite), mint and sage. As I was picking the herbs I smelt so many irises and daisies that were floating in the wind with their heads.

i@MILK - The photo of a cow that produced the milk for my cake was taken of my friend's father's favorite cow Liska. Mirko adores his cows and they are treated with care. As he was showing me his stable he talked with such pride about his cows that his eyes sparkled as when he talks about his family. He makes farmers proud!

i@LEMON - For as long as I can remember I wish to grow lemons, figs, oranges, kakis, and kiwis. And I always thought that they do not grow in our part of the world. But I was wrong. Our neighbors are successful in growing them and that gave me courage to start with figs. My fig tree is still very small but getting stronger by the day and I cannot wait to pick my very own first fig. If I would be a tree I would want to be a fig tree. But anyway, if I will be successful with growing figs my next mission is growing lemons. We will see, therefore, this photo of a lemon is taken from the Ljubljana market where the seller was kind enough to allow me to take photos when buying them.

i@FLOUR - My father's mother grew up in a mill that is why I always had interest in bread making. The place where we buy our flour is in the nearest still-working mill in Radomlje and I like going there in the summer with my bike as the trail takes me by the river and I stop at the sound of mill-wheel.

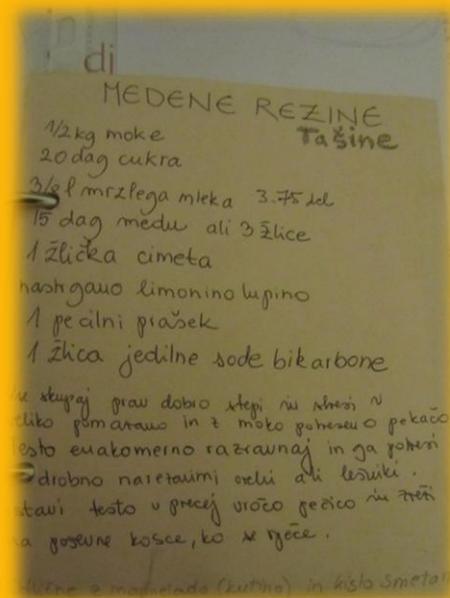
i@HONEY - When I was thinking where to go to buy honey, I decided to buy it from a place where we used to buy sugar for my grandpa's bees - in Mengeš. Mr & Mrs Blejec are very open-hearted people. Mr Blejec also had a farewell speech at my grandpa's funeral and we were remembering

him when we went to see Mr Blejec's beehive. Unfortunately, my grandpa Ivan is not alive for quite some time now but I have in my memories all the summer days that we spent at the beehive in his garden. In Slovenia beehives are beautifully decorated and painted with different stories of national heritage and my grandfather's beehive was no exception. I could spend days there just looking at the bees coming and going. My grandpa said that the bees taught him patience. Few years back grandpa's bees died and with them a little bit of us.

After taking the photos of my main ingredients for the cake there are some that are not a part of my food democracy journey – baking powder and sugar. Sugar is local as according to the legislation local food supply includes the whole area of Slovenia but, unfortunately I did not go to the region in Slovenia that produces it as I took term local as very near to my hometown. Ecologically produced baking powder (made out of wine stone) was bought in a local store.

Therefore, yes, I am proud to tell the story behind my food and, YES:

I AM A FOOD DEMOCRAT!"



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