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DISCOURSES ABOUT THE MEANING OF THE LOCAL FOOD
INVESTIGATIONS IN ROMANIAN URBAN CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

Up to now only a few studies about local food consumption in Romania have been realized and the majority of them are quantitative investigations. The aim of the present research which is based on focus group interviews was to bring further nuance to these previous quantitative data by asking the respondents to develop deeper narratives about what local food means to them, how they relate to local foods, how they perceive the different features of local foods (e.g. tradition, organic, taste, ingredients, etc.) and which are their motivations and impediments in connection with local food consumption. The research showed that consumers' involvement with local food occurs along product-based aspects, i.e. the intrinsic characteristics of food (taste, ingredients) and local food consumption seems to be much more motivated by health concerns and status assignment than by ethical and ecological reasons. Two major definitions of local food were mapped: 1) a place-centred, geographical definition and 2) a production-centred, 'how it is made' kind of definition.

Keywords: local food, geographic narrative, tradition, identity

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Food consumption – similarly to consumption in general – can be viewed as a cultural strategy through which people are able to make visible and communicate the social and cultural differences between them and to adhere to certain values and ideologies (Dolan 2002). Food consumption links the satisfaction of basic human needs like nutrition, staying alive and maintaining health with the expression of identities (Halkier 2004) and, in this way, it has a number of non-material objectives, which imply ethical, social, political, etc. concerns (Cohen–Murphy 2001).

In traditional societies people succeeded to anchor themselves through the practice of eating. In these societies the act of eating took place within the geographical conditions of a certain location (i.e. the availability of certain plants and animals provided a more or less stable menu for people) and there resulted particular ‘foodways’ (what, when, how to eat) which bound the local community together (Bildtgard 2008, see also Levi-Strauss 1969, Douglas 1991). Later, in the course of modernity and late modernity, nations and communities have still continued to define themselves through cultures of eating (e.g. national gastronomic cultures, specific cuisines, etc.) and, on smaller scale, foodways are still visible in the forms of specific local and traditional food products. The most dominant structuring force of food consumption in the era of modernity is, however, the rationalization of food production (e.g. through technologies that produced food and through global retailer chains that made the globalization of food possible) which lead to the de-localization of food. This globalized food system implies a great diversity of homogeneous, processed food products available throughout the seasons and regions. Obviously, food processing has a number of benefits like improved preservation, increased distribution potential, convenience, availability of products, etc., but processing also has a number of shortcomings, e.g. reduced nutritional value, negative health effects, pollution associated with the energy of processing and transportation, etc. (Kaplan 2012). Such risks which began to rise in connection with modern food raise a number of questions about what we eat (Bildtgard 2008) and this then causes consumers to re-verify their relation with food and to generate reflexive ‘life-politics’ in relation with food consumption (Connolly–Prothero 2008). Individuals start to reflect upon consumer “practices, preferences and even the process of reflection itself” (Adams–Raisborough 2008: 1168) and start to adopt alternative ways of food consumption versus the conventional models of food consumption based on industrial production and retailer chains.

The general assumption is that alternative food consumption practices can be motivated by two specific orientations: individualistic values centred around health and safety (Szasz 2007), expressing the “fear of con-

sequences for the consumer's body" (Miller 1995 – quoted by Connelly and Prothero 2008: 135); or by more general moral issues, e.g. the ethical treatment of animals, the morality of the genetically modified foods, hunger and other ways of exclusion, the role of food in constructing gender and personal identity, etc. (Kaplan 2012).

When referring to the axiological roots of the alternative food consumption we must note that food related behaviours are often routine practices and, as a result, in order to choose certain products which are in accordance with specific alternative consumption morals and practices, consumers have to make conscious efforts which then imply extra time and energy. On the other hand, as Beagan et al. (2010) observe, there are cases when consumers routinely make ethical consumption choices, without thinking or talking about it and at the level of practice alternative consumption is neither entirely reflexive nor entirely routine (see also Halkier 2001).

Romanian consumers' preferences for local or other alternative food products have not been systematically analysed and there are only a few, sporadic surveys and local level qualitative studies in this direction (Lubieniechi 2002, Stanculescu–Marin 2008, Stancu 2011, Titarenko et al. 2012, Unlock Market Research 2011, IRES 2013). These studies as well as those comparative research studies in which Romania has been included (e.g. Januszewska et al. 2011, Nistor 2014) show that consumers do have a clear preference for intrinsic food qualities (taste, ingredients, etc.), and such preferences are well explainable on the basis of status variables (e.g. education, income) in the sense that the lack of economic capital can limit consumers' effective engagement with high quality food products. In connection with local food products, the market survey data of the Unlock Market Research (2011) show that half of the Romanian population defines local products in terms of geographical provenance, while the other majority associates local food with national ingredients, respectively with local recipes and preferences for local food are motivated mostly by intrinsic, product-based aspects such as ingredients, taste, etc.

The present article is part of a broader research project¹ whose aim was to investigate the definitions, motivations and impediments of local food consumption. It aims to investigate how local food is defined by a specific public, i.e. Romanian urbanites; compared to the quantitative studies' approach, the present research focused on narratives and discourse repertoires and aimed to discover the ways in which respondents arguments their perceptions and attitudes towards local food. As the recent review article of Feldmann and Hamm (2015) suggests, investigating the meaning and definition of local food is one of the major directions of the studies on local food consumption as much as frequently we do not have a clear official definition of such products. The same is the case in Romania: the rural development strategy for the period 2014–2020 presents the development of short producer-consumer chains as one of the priorities, however it does not define the meaning and extent of such short chains (MADR 2014a); similarly, the MADR (2014b) guidance concerning traditional product attestation defines local food products at the intersection of the local and the traditional and contends that traditional food products are products that are made in Romania, based on local ingredients,

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lack additives and are based on traditional recipes and/or on traditional ways of production and are distinguishable from other products in the same category.

LOCAL FOOD CONSUMPTION AS ALTERNATIVE CONSUMPTION

The alternative forms of food consumption comprise those types of foods which are different from the classical, homogeneous, retailer chains based products. Alternative ways of food consumption can take different forms and are usually motivated by ethical and/or environmental values (e.g. environmental protection, fair treatment of the animals and workers involved in the production), health and taste concerns (e.g. diets, weight-control, functional foods, ingredients, etc.) and, consequently, it is assumed that they constitute *purchasing decisions which go beyond economic considerations* (Micheletti 2003). Alternative food consumption initiatives can have different names, in accordance with their major goal and motivations. They can be referred as ethical consumption (e.g. Shaw–Shiu 2003), sustainable consumption (e.g. Southerton et al. 2004, Seyfang 2006), critical consumerism (e.g. Sassatelli 2006), etc.

Within the alternative food consumption movement, local food consumption is a specific case. In the context of the global food system, within which the distances between producers are increased and direct control over food from the part of the consumers becomes difficult (Tischner–Kjaernes 2010), local or short food chains can provide an alternative for seasonal and supposedly greener, fresher and healthier products (Morgan 2010). In fact, the case of local food is very complex and can be considered a cultural phenomenon (Pratt 2007, Martinez et al. 2010), whose roots are located in several other movements, in each of which the local is promoted for various reasons: e.g. for environmental reasons (i.e. consuming locally reduces the quantity of non-renewable energy used in food transport); for political and economic reasons (i.e. construction and empowerment of local economies and community based agriculture; direct relationships between producers and consumers by cutting out the commercial middlemen and selling direct to consumers, etc.); healthism (shorter transportation routes coincide with fresher products, with the reduced use of additives in the food products), etc.

As a consequence, local food represents a geographical concept related to the distance between producers and consumers (Martinez et al. 2010). On the other hand, and mostly from the perspective of the consumers, local products have a number of benefits which are usually centred around trust: knowledge of the origins of food, ingredients², re-personalization of commercial relations, etc. (Smithers et al. 2008). In this latter sense, local food related initiatives include many attempts whose aim is to connect producers to consumers. The shopping experiences offered by taste education shows and local food markets build not only trust, but they also bring pleasure to the consumers in the form of the exploration activities involved in the search of

² In this respect, local food is frequently used as synonym for the so called ‘organic food’ which is considered to be food free of pesticides and chemicals. Organic food is the result of organic agriculture which represents a production system that “sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people” and “relies on ecological processes, biodiversity, and cycles adapted to local conditions”, so that “organic agriculture combines tradition, innovation, and science to benefit the hared environment and promote fair relationships and a good quality of life for all involved (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements 2009, 1 – quoted by Guido et al. 2010: 81). Thus, four principles are at the basis of organic agriculture: health, ecology, fairness and care (Guido et al. 2010).

fresher, tastier, etc. goods. Local food consumption frequently includes a strong social element, meaning that this type of shopping and consumption experiences are usually shared experiences within families, friends and communities (Schaefer–Crane 2005).

When considering local food we must also refer to several critical assumptions which challenge the ethical character of such consumption or consumers' ability to constantly pursue conscious, reflexive purchasing decisions. In the case of local food, there is a risk to fall into the so called 'local trap' which is the tendency to assume that the local is inherently associated with positive attributes (Pratt 2007). Indeed, local food refers to food produced locally, in a specific region with labels of authenticity. However, as Tischner and Kjaernes (2010) contend, such labels can be a problematic dimension of the local products, as far as such labels do not always guarantee fewer food miles, and there are cases when authentic local foods are traded globally. Thus, the best practice in connection with local eating would be to choose those local foods which are produced close to the consumer, but this kind of 'regional sourcing' is in contradiction with the political, economic and social agenda of free trade and thus implies marginalization, for instance in terms of excluding developing countries from exporting their products across the globe (ibidem). Similarly, Martinez et al. (2010) contend, that not all the products sold at farmers markets are local products, as far as some vendors come from outside the local region, while others may not sell products that are produced within the region. Clarke et al. (2008) also mention several shortcomings which are implicit of local food consumption: localist food regimes are not equally available to all social groups of consumers; the ethical values of local alternative food systems may be internally contradictory, i.e. emphasis on localism often privileges ecological sustainability over social justice; the political and ethical branding of local foods may be subverted to mainstream processes, in the sense that the quality of these products is increasingly associated with their premium prices.

Among the critics, there are authors (e.g. Barnett et al. 2005, Devinney et al. 2010) who contend that ethical consumption is nothing more than a myth because the concept itself is too broadly defined, to loosely operationalized and too moralistic in its stance. Consequently, they suggest that it would be more correct to speak about consumer social responsibility instead of ethical consumption, because social responsibility can be better operationalized (e.g. donations or dispositions to be involved in protests and boycotts; product preferences; specific purchasing and non-purchasing behaviour). Criticism also targets the individualistic character of alternative food consumption, which assumes that consumers are "philosophically consistent actors who hold overarching ideologies and continually connect the dots between these abstract values and a wide variety of specific consumption behaviors" (Holt 2012: 239). In fact, empirical studies tend to show that the congruency between values and overt actions is rather a myth and consumer choices are limited also by macro-level constraints. Thus, it would be too naïve to put the accent on the consumers as drivers of social change and to expect that many individuals, added together, can change the world (Willis–Schor 2012).

In summary, as a response to such criticism we can conclude that local food consumption and associated practices can be conceptualized as critical reactions towards the global food industry, respectively towards supply chains. It is not about the fact that alternative consumption does not have imperfections, it is much more about the fact that it is stimulated by various motivations ranging from ethical concerns and consumers' lack

of trust in conventional food products to hedonistic reasons referring to health promotion (Feldmann–Hamm 2015) and, thus provides a fertile terrain to explore the intersections between reflexivity, ethics, consumption practices and identity.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research was based on a qualitative strategy, including focus group interviews which is the most dominant research design in connection with local food consumption (Feldmann–Hamm 2015). Ten focus group interviews have been conducted in five Romanian urban locations (two groups in each location), including both large cities (Bucharest, Brasov, Cluj-Napoca) and small towns (Sfantu Gheorghe/Sepsiszentgyörgy and Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda). Finally, an online focus group has been conducted via Skype, having as participants seven consumers from these locations. These were consumers who identified themselves as dedicated, conscious consumers of local foods, otherwise the participants in the ten offline focus groups represented the general public in connection with local food consumption³. When selecting these localities, the starting rationale was that depending on their residential background (town versus city), citizens may attach different meanings to local food and may have different knowledge, motivations and accessibility about/to such food products. In each of the five localities, one out of the two focus groups consisted of young participants (20–35 years old), living alone in independent households, without children, while the other focus group comprised middle aged and older people (36–75 years old), with family (husband, wife, child/ren). Thus, age and family status were those socio-demographic category alongside participants have been selected in one of these groups, while in terms of other socio-demographic characteristics, the groups were rather heterogeneous. The number of participants in the groups consisted in 5–7 people⁴. Focus groups have been conducted between May and July 2014. The online focus group was conducted in September 2014.

The general aim of the research was to answer the questions of how individuals define local food; what such food means to them; which are those patterns of the local food that are mentioned as salient characteristics of such foods; how consumers are involved in the practice of local food consumption; which are their major motivations and impediments when consuming local food products. During the group interviews the semi-structured design was followed, so that there were some previously defined questions, while others emerged during the discussions.

Discussions have been tape recorded and then the material has been transposed into written text. The transcripts, were coded using QSR NVivo for Windows. The analysis in terms of codes, major themes and corresponding semantic narratives followed the paradigm of the grounded theory (e.g. Strauss–Corbin 1990).

THE MEANING OF LOCAL FOOD: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The process of codification resulted in two major themes regarding the definition of local food, to both

3 Participants received a filter questionnaire, based on which results they were selected in the groups.

4 Participants have been selected via Facebook messages, so that I posted a call for participation on my wall and asked my network members to share the message in the respective localities. In this way, I succeeded to collect relatively rapidly those 6-8 people who participated in each group.

of them corresponding several specific micro-narratives: 1) a place-centred theme, i.e. a geographic narrative which defines local food by anchoring it to a certain locality, and 2) a production centred theme, i.e. a narrative which is concerned with ways of production (i.e. manufacture), ingredients and commercialization of the local food.

Local food as geography

The identification of local food with a specific place results in a geographic narrative; respondents are operating with an imaginative scale ranged between adjacent, personal places (e.g. one's own garden) and more distant or general places (e.g. Romania). Obviously, the geographic narrative accentuates the 'local' out of the whole local food concept and it is mostly concerned with distances and with authenticity in terms of place and origin of products, rather than with the ingredients or production methods. This definition overlaps with those views of the literature which conceptualize local food in terms of geography and distance, i.e. short supply chains (e.g. Martinez et al. 2010). As Feagan (2007) contends, local food systems are "oriented around some form of geographic delimitations of space variously labeled the local, place and community" (Feagan 2007: 33). Indeed, our interviewees referred to such delimitations when they attempted to define local food. The discourses frequently negotiated between the most adjacent, i.e. personal space and a more distant, i.e. less personal place, e.g. a certain Romanian county or the country itself. Moreover, local identity and community-based traditions were also mentioned as puzzles of the definitions. The respondents tended also to think that local food can have different degrees of authenticity in terms of localness, and some products might be more local than the others. Here, reflexivity occurred mostly in terms of place-consciousness (e.g. the place of origin should be mentioned on the labels), rather than in the form of other product attributes, e.g. intrinsic qualities like ingredients, taste, etc.

"Local food is local when I think of my garden. (...) I have a small garden here in the city, and there me and my wife are cultivating our own vegetables... (...) Now, if we are talking about local food, these are the local foods, what we do in our garden... (...) Now, it is another discussion if what we pick up from the market is really local..." (Man, Cluj-Napoca).

"Everything what is produced inside a certain circle, for instance in a county, or inside a region, for instance in the Szeklerland region, is local food. (...) But these are less local compared with my grandparents' garden." (Man, Miercurea Ciuc)

The so called 'localization of the local' brings into the discussion the issue of identity: a frequent strategy of the definitions is the anchoring of the local food to certain traditional local foods, gastronomic heritage or brands. Some food products, which in their names, brands or labels make reference to a certain local place, region, community or gastronomy are perceived as being more local or being 'the' local products, compared with those products which – even if they are made in the same locality, region, etc. – do not assume through their brands, labels, etc. their clear provenance. In the respondents' view, marketing and branding strategies have a huge role in anchoring a product to a place or community, even if in some cases these locally labelled products are marketed far away from their primary origin. When associating the local food with such kind of brands, the interviewees provide big emotional discourses and usually refer to some generic brands for specific

Romanian counties whose names have been developed during the socialist era, when each county had its distinctive brand of food products. During the transition period of the 1990s, these brands, production lines, etc. have been privatized, and the products became commercialized throughout the country, but in many cases the name of the products has remained the same.

“Napolact [The brand name of the milk products produced in Cluj county during the socialist era was preserved even after the factory became privatized – author’s note] for instance is a local product. (...) We all know that it is not local any more because they bring the milk from other counties outside Cluj, and I also heard that they have factories outside our county as well, and the brand itself is sold to foreigners, but I still think of the Napolact as our brand. (...) Sometimes, when I opt for other milk products (...) I feel somehow guilty... as if I am unfaithful to my Napolact...” (Woman, Cluj-Napoca).

“Harmopan [the brand name for bakery products produced in Miercurea Ciuc/Csíkszereda – author’s note], the products which are named Székely Termék, the Gobé foods, the Csíki sör, Borsec mineral water or Tusnad – these are the local products for me. But, after all, all those products, which are made in Romania are local products. (...) I think we must think in stages, about products made in a locality, then in a county, and after these, in the country” (Man, Miercurea Ciuc).

“I am very addicted to Poiana chocolates. These used to be our brand in Brasov. Now we call them Suchardine, but I still think of Poiana as a local chocolate. We are familiar with Poiana in Brasov, because everyone knows someone who has worked in the chocolate factory... (...) And the same is the case with other products, like mineral waters, Borsec, Tusnad... With meat products, like Sergiana...” (Woman, Brasov).

“There was some years ago a huge promotion around ROM chocolate. (...) There was a campaign to find the most authentic Romanian product, and that resulted in the ROM chocolate... This is packaged in a paper which is painted in red, yellow and blue... like the Romanian flag. This is quite explicit (...) If I remember well, the chocolate has written on it Bucuresti... So this is the genuine Romanian chocolate... And yes, I think people really perceive it like Romanian... Thus, you can have a local product and you can ensure its local nature through a campaign... (Man, Bucharest).

These types of narratives which put the accent on identity can be interpreted in terms of specific foodways (Bildtgaard 2008) and illustrate that there are brands which can be tied to certain communities or localities and they continue to be impregnated by emotions, habits and trust and generate strong “alimentalities” (Bildtgaard 2008) in connection with local foods.

Local food as manufacture

While the place centred narrative is not or only in a small degree concerned with production and commercialization methods and with the intrinsic qualities of the products, the another major definition of local food puts the accent exactly on these aspects. Compared to the former narrative, this is a broader one and comprises both process- and product-based (cf. Bond et al. 2008) definitions. Out of the many micro-narratives, the most dominant are 1) those which accentuate that local products mean traditional and small scale production/commercialization practices, i.e. small farms, small enterprises (manufactures), small markets, etc.; 2) those which insist on the ingredients of the local products, and define them in terms of organic, natural food (e.g. fresh products, lack of E, natural ingredients, healthy ingredients, etc.). Thus, this is a narrative which re-

fers to both extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of local food production.

Compared with the previous, geographic definition, this definition is stricter: besides the importance of distances, it insists on specific production practices (process-based attributes) which go well beyond the issue of identity. Here, local food is the synonym of the small, slow and organic food, and constitutes the alternative food to the industrialized, retailer chains-based products.

“(...) local food is something which is made in small farms or in small factories, in small series, and for these reasons you are not able to find these foods all over the country. Local food is something exclusive, if I can say, because it is made in small numbers (...) I have experiences with products which started as local foods, on a small scale, and once they started to produce them on a larger scale their quality became questionable. The local is where the human hand is still visible” (Man, Bucharest).

“You can have standards in small enterprises as well. The question is if you are producing the food in traditional ways... (...) You can use machines and technology. The question is if you are intending to tie these products to something old, authentic, local...” (Woman, Cluj).

In these narratives identity means something more than a certain place, brand or product; it means traditional production practices and corresponding marketing strategies, preferably short supply chains. Local foods have a human face, are easily recognizable not only in terms of packaging and selling practices, but also in terms of their producers. Thus, local products are frequently tied to the issue of trust in terms of knowing the origin of food and the producers (cf. Smithers et al. 2008). Farmers' markets are here defined as the 'show-rooms for local products', as specific sites for food producers and consumers to find each other are important scenes for experiencing not only the local food itself, but also trust and identity. Local food is much more a social enterprise, than a commercial enterprise and is filled with emotions, trust and entertainment. This aspect is especially important in the case of the dedicated consumers of local foods (the interviewees who took part in the online focus group), but other members emphasized this issue as well:

“You can buy the Hungarian stuffed cabbage as a conserve, but this is just an illusion. A bad illusion... The genuine cabbage is what you are cooking in a traditional way, in a clay pot, by using traditional ingredients... (...) If you want to eat genuine stuffed cabbage, you go to grandma, to a traditional restaurant or to a food festival... That's all. Now we can replace the cabbage with other foods... If you want the local tradition in the form of a food, you can have it only in such places...” (Man, Miercurea Ciuc).

“Local food is what we can find at traditional markets. These are the products which are made in the kitchen or in small factories and then are sold at these occasions. They are labelled as natural, organic, traditional and so on and frequently are sold by the producers themselves. I was once or twice in such markets (...), I liked that there were producers as well... I have got a kind of insight...” (Woman, Brasov).

The intrinsic, product-based narrative (i.e. characteristics of products like ingredients, taste and healthiness) is an important part of this definition. The literature about local food contends that local food is frequently used as synonym for the so called 'organic food' which is considered to be food free of pesticides and chemicals (Guido et al. 2010). Indeed, our interviewees tended to identify local foods with organic products and insisted on several intrinsic attributes of such foods. It is important to mention that such characteristics are articulated also in terms of expectations towards local foods. Respondents delivered extensive narratives

about how local products ‘should be’; such narratives overlap with those in which respondents expressed their doubts and mistrust about local food and its quality. There are situations in which respondents bought something because they supposed it is local and thus the product has several characteristics respondents were looking for (e.g. freshness) and then they observed that the product failed to fulfil the expectations. Such inconsistency between expectations and concrete experiences caused dissonance especially in the case of those consumers who (probably because of the inconsistency itself) are not buying local foods on a recurrent basis. On the other hand, the dedicated consumers of the local food seem to be more permissive towards the quality of the local food, but it is important to observe that this permissiveness regards the extrinsic rather than the intrinsic patterns of the food products. Our data suggest that extrinsic product qualities are the most important to attract the consumers to the local foods, but in order to attach them on the long term to these products, intrinsic product qualities are more important cues.

“For me the package is not important... It happens that the product is packaged in a bad way... I mean, if I look at the product I have the feeling that the product is ugly or bad... But I know that the product inside this package is OK, it tastes well and it is natural. That is more important for me.” (Woman from the online focus group)

Respondents’ concern about the quality of the food products is perfectly intelligible and comes not as a surprise, since the Romanian consumers, similarly to in other countries, put a great emphasis on the intrinsic qualities of food products (Januszewska et al. 2011). Here it must be mentioned also that interviewees tended to perceive local food as being more expensive compared with the conventional products and thus their expectations in terms of cost-benefit ratio is even more accentuated (cf. Olson–Jacoby 1972).

“Ingredients. That is the point. We all knew that there is the assumption that local food is the food which is made in grandma’s garden. But give me a break! Do you want to say that grandma does not use pesticides?! (...) Local food is something rare, because it is not affordable for the producers to produce clean things. Yes, theoretically, local food is what is produced by small farmers and sold at these markets, but in practice, local food exists only more or less, because of the questionable ingredients.” (Man, Brasov).

“When I come to such markets I usually come for the natural products. (...) It happened to me that I bought products which later on proved to be not so natural. But, I still like the atmosphere of these markets, the fact that I can meet the producers, I like to taste the products, to explore... In any case, these are more natural than all those foods sold in the supermarket... Unfortunately, we cannot afford to buy everything from here ... ” (Woman, Brasov).

The meaning of local food is not a clear thing by far: respondents usually have their own specific opinions, but they bring into question very many other definitions as well, and afterwards they negotiate between these and finally develop a definition which is viewed with reservations by the respondents.

“For me, local food is mostly about localization... Where do we place the product... I think... But now, I am not quite sure... Local food can be also something which is organic... Or is the local food organic?... I am not quite sure...” (Woman, Cluj-Napoca).

“Everyone can have a certain meaning. We used to call those products which are sold at farmers’ market local foods, but there are local foods which are not sold at such markets... And sometimes we think that

only vegetables from our own garden are local... The local can have very many meanings, but I am not quite sure..." (Woman, Bucharest).

The most insecure respondents about their definitions are those who are the least involved in the effective consumption of local food, while those who are dedicated consumers of local foods (e.g. the participants of the online focus group or those who live in small towns) manifest a clearer view about the meaning of the local food. This finding accentuates the role of food- and lifestyle-communities in developing clearer attitudes towards alternative forms of consumption in as much as during the course of modernity and late-modernity individuals are 'left alone' and they have to choose between different lifestyles and identities all by themselves. In the absence of anchoring, individuals' choices very much imply the risk of failure (i.e. the choice of non-adequate food whether we take the issue of adequacy from the perspective of individual health or social or environmental concern, e.g. the choice of food which is 'too global', so that it implies greater food miles and results in considerable pollution) and in this context there is the need to rely on secondary agencies and institutions – like the market or the mass media – when making the food choice (Bauman 1992, Wilska 2002)⁵.

It was a surprising finding that respondents' place of residence (city versus town) did not have a clear influence on the definitions. In the case of both cities and towns respondents provided definitions in accordance with the geographic or with manufacture narrative. The most striking difference was that the effective experiencing of the local food is somewhat more common in the case of the participants from small towns. This has to do, probably, with the fact that small town citizens are experiencing the so-called self-supplied food, i.e. food which is grown in their or in their parents' and grandparents' gardens⁶ more and more often and they had also experienced the farmers' markets more frequently (farmers' markets are organized on a regular basis on both Sfântu Gheorghe and Miercurea Ciuc).

BEYOND THE DEFINITIONS: THE INVOLVEMENT WITH LOCAL FOODS

The analysis suggested that interviewees consume those foods which they label as local mostly in the absence of a conscious decision concerning sustainability of ethics. They consume local food as a routine (e.g. in the case of those who grow vegetables in their own garden or those who were used to buy vegetables from farmers' markets), as entertainment (e.g. those who go to a farmers' market), as health protection (those who more or less constantly choose local products), or as a fashion (e.g. those who are frequenting slow food type restaurants). In spite of these loose motivations in terms of ecological and social sustainability, the majority of the respondents – especially young, well educated respondents – are aware that local food consumption has a number of benefits in terms of sustainability both concerning the producers and the environment.

"I usually know that we should buy only the local... Because it is good for all of us... It helps small produc-

5 The participants of the online focus group which consisted in people who identified themselves as dedicated consumers of local foods, showed that such people are members of several online or offline communities concerned with the issue of local food, healthy eating, etc. Thus, they are continuously sharing information about local foods, farmers' markets, etc. The information about local foods is the theme of a different article (Nistor 2015).

6 It must be noted, however, that self-supply is specific for the whole Romanian, and more generally, for the whole Eastern European context. In Romania the urban population has a significant degree (depending on the social status of the household) of self-consumption, coming from the transfers of products from their relatives who live in the rural area (cf. Alexandri-Alboiu 2009).

ers... The food is healthier, it is not transported miles and miles... I know... Sometimes I think of these, but I cannot say that all of my shopping goes in this way... Sometimes I choose what is cheap, other times I choose what is tastier, or what I used to chose before. I also try to think of my weight” (Woman, Cluj-Napoca).

“When I go to the market I go because I have more trust in those products. I think they have not so many pesticides... I go for sure because of my health” (Man, Bucharest).

“We have a producer who brings us vegetables and milk. He is an old man from a village nearby. He used to bring products for my parents as well (...) Even when I pay my old man for the vegetables, I do not think that I am helping him. It is much more a routine... He brings the vegetables... I pay for them...” (Woman, Bucharest).

The literature on sustainable consumption contends that through buying or avoiding certain food products citizen-consumers can be mobilized to address social and/or ecological injustices (Beagan et al. 2010, Johnston 2008) and thus the adherents of various forms of alternative food consumption are forming a broader social movement which challenges the unsustainable and the unfair nature of global food production. Food citizens are also members of an imagined community of ideas and practices (Shaw 2007) or they form ‘neo-tribes’ (Bauman 1992) and no matter that members of such communities are situated far away from each other they are linked together by the values and practices they share in connection with food consumption. In our case, this is not very much the case: even the most dedicated consumers of local foods (e.g. the participants of the online focus group) outlined the importance of product-based attributes and health related concerns as the most important motivations of consuming local food (cf. Titarenko et al. 2012). Process-based attributes are important mainly in the sense of traditional production methods, and – at least in terms of effective practices – they rarely correspond to motivations related to altruistic motives (e.g. supporting local farmers, minimizing ecological footprints, etc.).

Thus, our data correspond much more to the observations of Szasz (2007) who considers that the turn towards alternative ways of consumption can be conceptualized in terms of individual safety and egocentric motives: by choosing to consume such products, consumers try to protect themselves and their motivations are individualist rather than political (cf. citizen-consumers).

It must be emphasized that local food consumption does not occur as a purely ad hoc practice. Respondents are usually aware of their choices, can outline specific motivations for consuming local foods, but these motivations only rarely correspond to ethical motives. Indeed, consumers are – on an abstract theoretical level – aware that local food can have an important role in ensuring sustainability, but such ethics only rarely become the driving forces of effective consumption practices.

However, self-centred motivations are not enough for turning the discourse into practice, and local food consumption seems to be a rather infrequent practice. The broader research showed that this occurs due to a number of impediments which are in line with those mentioned in the literature (see the review of Feldmann–Hamm 2015): not having enough information about the role of local food consumption in generating sustainability and thus even if they are dedicated consumers of local foods, they do this in practice for other reasons

(“We hear all the time about healthy eating, but I do not get enough information about how can I help farmers... There are only a few occasions to meet them... What can I do?”); local food is perceived to be expensive, and even if there is knowledge about the role of local food in generating sustainability, consumers cannot afford to enter the arena (“These are expensive products... I know that farmers have to invest in production and their living is dependent on what they sell. I cannot afford it, even if I want to”); scepticism regarding the intrinsic quality of the products (“Producers should think about losing consumers if they mess with the products. I do not trust these products... Farmers are also using pesticides, so what is the point?”) or the extrinsic quality of the products (“I do not share the opinion that local products must not be packaged in a showy way. I think it is important how a product looks”); inefficient marketing (“It would be easier to find these products in the supermarkets. Farmers’ markets are nice events, but you cannot rely solely on them. People are going several days a week to a supermarket, if such products are there they will come across them, so they will buy them, and so on...”); etc.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The majority of the interviewees define local food at the intersection between geography and tradition; this in line both with the official definition and with the previous quantitative data (e.g. Unlock Market Research 2011), but adds to them a further nuance: e.g. the fact that the geography of local food is a complex construct and the map of local food can have stricter or looser boundaries, it can refer to one’s own garden or to the whole country. Those who define local food in terms of manufacturing practices, are divided also between those who accentuate the extrinsic aspects of production, and those who put the accent on intrinsic product features.

This study aimed to contribute to a more comprehensive picture regarding local food in Romania. Obviously, the findings based on qualitative investigations cannot be generalized for the whole Romanian urban population, but they can serve towards a better interpretation and grounding of the existing or future quantitative data.

The analysis showed that in spite of its various motivations and more or less (in)coherent practice, local food is very much debated reflexively. Besides anchoring it to certain geographies or traditional production practices, local food is viewed as “a trusting (re)connection between the anxious consumer and the responsive producer” (Clarke et al. 2008: 220). Ethics has only limited structuring power and – at least on the basis of the present research – it is more suitable to consider local food consumption in terms of the aesthetics of consumption (Venkatesh–Meamber 2008), meaning that consumers’ decisions are motivated by strategies of identity construction, self-preservation rather than by moral duties and responsibilities. Our data suggested that local food related attitudes and practices depend not only on products’ intrinsic or extrinsic attributes, but also on consumer characteristics (age, gender, available income, family composition, etc.); as far as food choice is a complex function of sensory preferences, attitudes, ethical concerns, and price, in order to better theorize the case of local food consumption in Romania, we need more systematic research, both in terms of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

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