



Nordic Workshop -June 2008- Helsinki
Can consumers save the world?
Everyday food consumption and dilemmas of
sustainability

Change makers:
Who are they?

Laura Terragni, Hanne Torjusen, Gunnar
Vittersø

How can alternative consumption contribute to sustainable development?

Alternative (Food) Consumption between Tradition- Innovation- Institutionalization.

Why and where alternative food consumption takes place?

Who are the "change makers"? And what is the aftermath of experiences of alternative consumption?

Will they produce changes in mainstream values and practices?

Or will just be co-opted and become "business as usual?"

Alternative forms of consumption as:

- New markets
- New "messages"

If we observe the new movements that have emerged in the western society in the last decades, we observe that food have often played an important role: the organic movement, fair trade, and slow food, for instance, have been relevant experience of mobilisation and cultural transformation. At the core of these initiatives there is often a critic to conventional models of production and consumption, as they are not sustainable, fair, healthy, tasty: By promoting these initiatives the codes of established system of thinking, producing and consuming food are challenged, showing, at the same time, that alternatives are possible.

Early experiences with organic food in Norway

1930-70s:

Direct purchase from the farm

Forbrukerringer – 'Consumer circles'

Helios (1969) – first specialized shop for bio-dynamic products

Who were they?

- Many inspired by anthroposophy (Rudolf Steiner)

1970-80s

Debio established 1986 – possible to enter the conventional market with organic labeled food

Green movement – young, radical consumers

Direct sales of organic food in the 1980s



Hvis økoprodukter oppfattes som spesielle og verdifulle, har økoprodusentene et grunnlag for egen omsetning. (Foto Øyvind Sandberg)



*Rosina i Veten-pølsa er torgdagane som har vore svært vellukka.
(Foto: Torkjell Djupedal)*

Second stage

1990s:

Demand for organic food in the stores – few products available:

- Try to buy organic '... if I find it'
- Ahead of today's food and climate change debate:
'If they have two different types of carrots in the store, one labeled organic, but produced in Israel and the other produced by a farmer in Råde (the neighbour municipality), I buy the carrots from Råde.'

Environmental conscious consumers (well educated), special interest in food (health, environment, quality)

Early organic food campaign



Forbrukerne er minst villig til å redusere på kvalitetskravene, selv om produktet er miljøvennlig produsert.
(Foto: Øystein Skjæveland)

Third stage

2000 – 2008

Commercial and political attention to organic - Organic more mainstreamed in the conventional market

New food and agriculture discourse:

Farmers encouraged to diversify their farm income and find new markets (direct sales):

- Farmers Market (BM)
- New forms of farm food outlets, cafés, catering combined with farm tourism (NBG)

Organic food tailored for special markets

Special shops ('Food stories', 'Farmers market'), gourmet restaurants, music festivals

- Box Schemes and CSA

Sustainability discourse:

- Fair trade, Climate change debate: food miles, meat consumption
- More heterogeneous group of 'alternative consumers'?





Sveler med egg
fra lykkelige
hagehøns

15,-



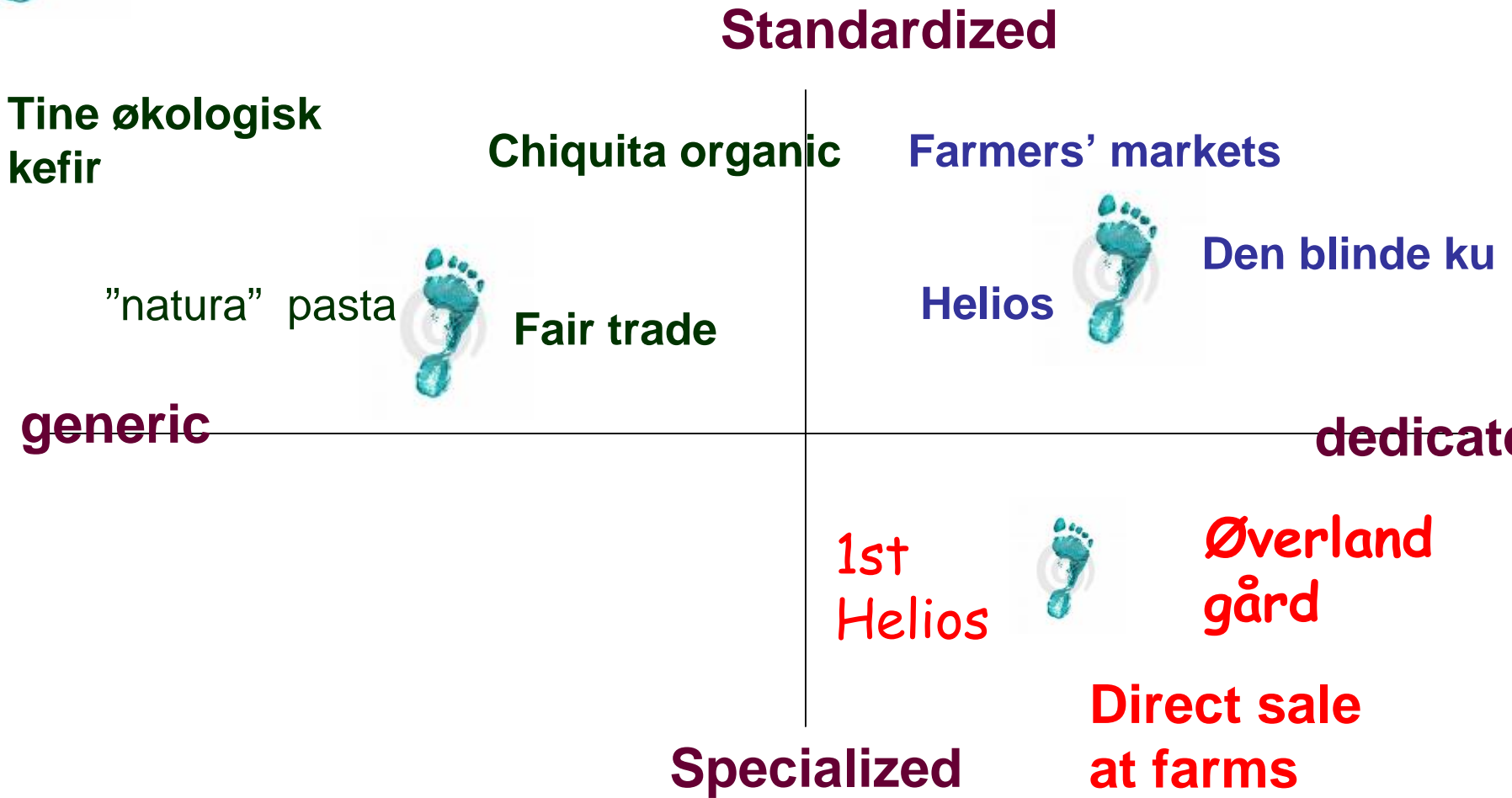
Has 'The Quality Turn' created a more heterogeneous group of 'alternative consumers'?:

- Increased availability has for some consumers made organic food part of the ordinary consumption of everyday life

In addition we have:

- Consumers with spending power that are willing to pay extra
- Consumers that want an extraordinary food experiences
- Consumers that seek special qualities (fresh produce, local specialities, organic food)
- Consumers that want to be 'trendy' (organic food at trendy cafés, coffee bars and restaurants)
- Forerunners seek for new products (fair trade) in the conventional markets and new relations between producers and consumers (e.g. CSA).

The worlds of production and consumption



Searching for alternative products

What happens when alternative products become “normalised” and enter in the standardized and generic food system? Do they still will be regarded by “alternative consumers” as symbols of their aspirations and lifestyles?

The more a product becomes generic (in terms of being commonly available but also in terms of losing its “alternative” meaning) the more it will become part of generic, routinized consumption practices.

However, we may expect also that people committed to forms of alternative consumption as a form of life politics will try to keep on in their effort, by supporting new initiatives and by looking for genuinely alternative products and, in doing so, they will foster the presence of “not normalised” forms of consumption representing new ideas, values and challenges.

The "trajectory" of alternative forms of consumption

Some alternative forms of consumption may become conventional and miss their symbolic values

Alternative consumers= introduce new challenges through products- or experiences- with a symbolic & political meaning-

This tendency is supported by data from a recent survey (SIFO SURVEY 2006)



Summing up:

Alternative form of consumption are relevant for producing change in mainstream production and consumption as they introduce new values and contribute to the institutionalization of sustainable practices.

At the same time – as institutionalization may imply loosing of an “alternative” meaning- alternative consumers may search for more ”genuine” and symbolic forms of alternative consumption.