

SUPPORTING LOCAL FARMS - SUPPORTING OUR FUTURE

by Dr. Diane Dodd



Dr. Diane Dodd is President of IGCAT and Executive Director of the European Region of Gastronomy Platform and Award. She is also European coordinator for the global network IFACCA (International Federation of Arts Councils and Cultural Agencies). She leads an MA course in Cultural Institutions and Policies for the International University of Catalonia in Barcelona, and an MA course on Events and Destination management for EUHTSTPol.

She is an independent evaluator for the Cultural Routes programme of the Council of Europe and editor of a number of Cultural Policy and Cultural Management publications for the European Cultural Foundation (ECF)

Family farmers meet growing societal demands for quality and diversity of food. Their intrinsic value as a cultural asset is only vaguely understood and therefore awareness campaigns are needed to place a spotlight on the growing possibility of the extinction of family farms.

Supporting family farming will be an important factor in mitigating rural poverty by the provision of self-produced food and the wider possibilities for building unique and culturally diverse products and services.

However, according to the 2014 Eurostat Report on the evolution of farm holdings between 2005 and 2010, the overall number of farms in the EU-27 fell by 17.0 % while their utilised agricultural area increased by 1.5%. So rather than farming 11.9 hectares in 2005, on average our family farmer was cultivating 14.5 hectares in 2010. Of course, the largest farms grew most¹. This has a lot to do with the introduction of technology and machines that can farm quicker and more cheaply than using farmhands. However, it is also to do with keeping costs down and selling more for less.

The consequences of this change may not be obvious unless you link this to the fact that the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) estimate that during the last century about 75 percent of the genetic diversity of agricultural crops has been lost. Farmers, in their need to be competitive, are increasingly dependent on farming more of the same crop variety and as a result we are seeing a rapidly diminishing gene pool of crops.

¹ Agriculture Statistics - The evolution of farm holdings, in Eurostat's statistical book on Agriculture, forestry and fishery statistics, available at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Agriculture_statistics_-_the_evolution_of_farm_holdings

Commercially successful, uniform varieties are replacing traditional ones. We have become so susceptible to this that unusual varieties are considered unappealing or worse, inedible. Movies and cartoons have contributed a lot to this social conditioning.

In her highly acclaimed TED Talk, Bhavani Prakash, lamented the loss of varieties in, for example carrot varieties. Purple and black varieties are in danger of extinction because the modern consumer only wants orange ones². We might blame Bugs Bunny for this but, what can we do to re-adjust our intolerance of unusual varieties?

IGCAT is working hard to raise awareness of local food and cultural diversity through both the Regions of Gastronomy Platform, the Young Chef Award and the Innovative Food Souvenir Award. The problem is that the rapid evolution in our food sources, that began as early as the 1900s and rapidly increased when genetically modified high-yielding seeds were introduced into the market in the 1950s, has all but left us with a generation that has no idea about what is local. We live in a modern world where we witness so much diversity on our supermarket shelves (much more than our grandparents would have encountered) that it is hard to raise awareness about the extinction of food types.

If we don't find solutions though we will have exasperated problems for regional development. Raising awareness and citizen pride in local diversity has to be a priority. This is where the cultural sector has a lot to offer. The arts and cultural sector has been lobbying for decades to safeguard cultural diversity and as a result have the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and the Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions³. It also gave birth the the International Fund for Cultural Diversity and UNESCO departments safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Within the text of the Convention (that has been reproduced for this reader) objective (g) is the only one that might be applied to food (if we consider food as a "good"): "(g) to give recognition to the distinctive nature of cultural activities, goods and services as vehicles of identity, values and meaning;". The Convention was never expected to be used for protecting and promoting food diversity but it is the author's conviction that applying this convention to food would have some merit.

The food and agricultural sector, however, need to be brought on board and be given the tools to see their work in protecting and promoting local food diversity as an honourable and important task that is valued and rewarded. We need to find the right measures to reward farmers and producers who want to continue or return to producing local food varieties. Farmers and producers

² Food plant diversity -- the key to life: Bhavani Prakash at TEDxSingaporeWomen 2012: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zk-aC_yKr44 (last accessed 10_04_2017)

³ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=31038&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html (last accessed 10_04_2017)

are good at what they do but in order to survive they need support in branding, marketing and selling their products. They need support to raise the public's awareness so that unusual looking or distinct food becomes a source of pride. Some policy measures that could be adopted include:

1. Food fairs highlighting distinctive varieties of a particular food crop with tastings, discussions, round tables, cooking competitions etc.
2. Support to find solutions to meet food hygiene/safety regulations while using traditional methods for elaboration or production.
3. Use of and introduction to local food varieties in schools (reintroduction of gardening and cooking classes in the curriculum or as an extra-curricula activity).
4. Agreements developed with supermarket chains to promote and highlight local produce.
5. Special conditions at local markets.
6. Community growing projects that focus on growing 'traditional' varieties.
7. Agri-tourism and heritage food tours
8. Open farm days

Benefits can be yielded in other sectors such as hospitality and tourism. As visitors increasingly seek out "authentic" and/or "original experiences", new or unusual plant/animal varieties or products derived from them provide a point of attraction.

The problem is how to satisfy demand in high and reduced tourist season. A number of popular tourism islands in the Mediterranean report having to import 80% of their food during the intensive summer season. This would seem unsustainable and incongruous. However, hoteliers site the inability of local producers to supply the sufficient amount, at an equitable price and a high enough standard. There is clearly a lot of work needed to support adjustments in the tourism sector so that they can contribute to a more sustainable and diverse future for regional development.

On the surface, the most effort in this area is being made by small restaurant or hotel holdings (bed and breakfasts, family run restaurants and the like). This small but growing sector of the economy is recognising both the visitors' increasing need to experience "something different" on their travels and to "learn."

More and more farms are opening their doors to visitors, farmers are diversifying their activities and providing "experiences" to the more discerning visitors who are then more likely to take products home as "original" souvenirs.

This is good news for regions where land is available and youth unemployment rife. However, here we face another challenge. As gardening and cookery has been all but removed from the curriculum in most schools in Europe, there is a dearth of knowledge and interest in farming as a career. To address the growing demand for more local food diversity, farming and producing will

need to become sexy again. Smart solutions and joined interdisciplinary thinking are urgently needed to address these challenges. The challenge is great because family farms have difficulty to:

1. access farming resources (such as land and capital with large corporate farms often distorting the land rental market).
2. enter markets in new ways (lack of skills in branding and developing creative routes to market).
3. work round EU regulations.

Family farmers traditionally contributed to environmentally sustainable agricultural systems, preserved landscape features and contributed to biodiversity – therefore we must put in the measures necessary to ensure that they can compete and thrive, against an increasingly globalised market.

In a small way, IGCAT is trying to support access to new markets through the Regions of Gastronomy Platform yet, we still have to find better and new ways to support cross-marketing throughout the regions. If we can achieve this, it will support local food production and export, as well as the development of creative food experiences.

This paper was written in 2017 .

IGCAT's mission is to empower and facility local communities to realise the potential of their distinct food, culture, arts and sustainable tourism and local resources.

© IGCAT and the author 2017

You may copy, download or print IGCAT content for your own use, and you can include excerpts from IGCAT publications and multimedia products in your own documents, presentations, blogs, websites and teaching materials, provided that suitable acknowledgement of IGCAT and the author is given. Requests for permission to photocopy portions of this material for public or commercial use and/or translation rights should be submitted to info@igcat.org.

Published by IGCAT www.igcat.org