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Trust and the clean food imaginaries: an analysis of a short food supply chain from Romania

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As concerns about food safety and environmental issues gain more attention in the public eye, organic labels are growing in popularity, being presented as the solution for a more sustainable and conscious food system. Yet, organic certificates have not actively managed to change the food system but merely created a niche to be exploited. Through an Alternative Food Network framework, this paper looks at how small producers, who are otherwise excluded from accessing the premium prices of organic food markets, can still seize community economic rent through the close relationship formed as part of community-supported agriculture. Using a qualitative research methodology based on semi-structured interviews and secondary data analysis, and drawing from Alternative food networks literature, this paper investigates one alternative network from Romania called Peasant Box (Cutia Țăranului). Peasant Box re-spatialises the distribution chain by creating a direct selling network between food producers and consumers. This research focuses on how consumers and producers perceive the value of food and the distinct discursive constructions regarding food, as either valued based on the place of origin (authenticity) or on its production (naturalness). Peasant Box operates outside formalised certification, and the food is considered good by virtue of trust, which is formed through the long-lasting relationship between consumers and producers.

1. Introduction

The rising awareness about the harmful consequences of intensive agriculture for both the environment, through the loss in biodiversity, use of harmful chemicals in the soil, and for local communities, due to the loss of jobs to automation and the marginalisation of small producers, has resulted in an increased demand for products obtained through more responsible practices like ecologically grown and Fair-trade products. The quality turn (Goodman, 2003), as it is often called, is the premise for many of the alternative food movements seen today.

The rising demand for these types of products has led to the creation of third-party or voluntary organic certification schemes that require a series of standards that ensure the food obtained meets ethical concerns. In Romania, as in many other countries, the process of organic certification is made through private agents that have the role in inspecting and overviewing the producer, and ensuring the standards of production are implemented (Order nr. 895/2016). To become certified, the producers must subject themselves to a long and heavily bureaucratic procedure, as well as to random inspections and sampling. The process of transitioning from standard to certified organic agriculture is not affordable for everyone. Thus, it creates a

scarcity of certified products, which further increases the prices, offering an incentive to economic agents that want to harbour the organic food market's economic rents. Apart from the exclusionary effect that organic certificates can have, it is also worth mentioning the danger of encouraging the same behaviours they are supposed to deter when corporations adopt these organic standards without changing the productivist logic that underlies the entire industry. Moreover, by being voluntary, organic certifications do not change the system of food production and distribution to a more just and sustainable one, but merely create a niche in the market to be exploited. The system which produces cheap food with harmful methods remains the same, and functions, alongside the certified organic ones, creates consumption inequalities, by only offering the chance of safe and ethical consumption to those who can afford it.

Alternative food networks, especially direct selling networks like CSA (community-supported agriculture) are meant to address this issue by re-introducing social relations into the food system, fostering a logic of care and reciprocity as opposed to only a market-driven logic. That is not to say the CSA functions completely outside the market's logic, but there are indeed certain aspects of these practices that cannot be understood simply in utilitarian terms. More than that, the direct relationship between consumers and producers that stands as the premise of these kinds of networks is founded on trust and builds up trust. Consequently, farmers can pick the economic rents (Galt, 2013, p. 345) not based on third party certifications but based on the consumer trust fostered by direct relationship and on the moral value ascribed to the food (as being more sustainable or more just to the local communities).

This paper focuses on one of these types of alternative distribution networks from Romania, called Peasant Box (Cutia Țăranului), which works based on a direct subscription to a near-city farm, which periodically prepares and delivers a box of various seasonal foods obtained in the household. The subscription is a long-term one, excluded from the possibility of purchasing a box only once, precisely to encourage the formation of a relationship between consumer and producer. This study aims to uncover how food is understood and perceived by the producers and consumers at Peasant's Box, unravelling the discourse around food certificates and the "clean" food imaginary.

1.1 Alternative food networks – conceptualisation and critical reflections.

Alternative food network (AFN) is a broad term that incorporates several food production and distribution practices that present themselves as an alternative to conventional distribution systems (Corsi et al., 2018, p. 10). These practices can take various forms, among which we list community-supported agriculture (CSA), farmer's markets, direct distribution schemes, solidarity purchasing groups, urban gardens, agricultural cooperatives (Harris, 2010, p. 355). These practices are so varied, and "AFN" serves more as an umbrella term that is defined by its opposition to mainstream distribution channels (Renting, Schermer, & Rossi, 2012, p. 291).

Given that these alternative distribution chains cannot be directly defined, it is necessary to refer to some key features they have. First of all, they exist in a political context of the global economic restructuring, concerns about social justice and environmental sustainability as well as a decline of rurality and a de-localisation of the entire production process, driven by neoliberal changes (Moragues-Faus, 2017). Therefore, it is a large-scale movement in which consumers play an active role, politically assumed, based on ethical principles. AFNs are characterised by the relationship between consumer and producer that extends beyond an instrumental purpose so that participation in this type of exchange has an intrinsic symbolic value for both parties beyond market logic (Corsi et al., 2018, p. 201). The re-spatialisation of production and distribution and the establishment of a relationship based on solidarity, are the premises of these various types of exchanges (Harris, 2010, p. 355). It is important to point out that the localisation of food systems is not intrinsically more ethical or just. In the literature, localism is problematised as a form of normative discourse, which tends to naturalise an ideal about what it means to produce and consume food. Non-reflective localism transposes a standardised, apparently a-political vision of what quality means in food production, equating the place with the correct way of living and consuming. In their paper, DuPuis, & Goodman (2012 p.364) propose the term reflexive localism, as a solution to this type of discourse that universalises a certain elitist lifestyle, which involves taking a polit-

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ical position in opposition to globalism as a starting point for a movement focusing on local consumption. The study of short distribution chains raises the issue of defining these systems using the concept of "alternative", referring to the quality of these systems being distinctive to globalised distribution systems (Holloway et al., 2007, p. 2). The alternative-conventional duality can thus generate ambiguity; in reality, the economic practices that characterise these networks are not so easily placed in one of the two spheres. Due to the heterogeneity of consumers' motivations to participate in such schemes, classifying into one of the categories becomes difficult. The alternative-conventional dichotomy should thus be understood in the form of a continuum within which these practices can be placed (Corsi et al., 2018, p. 307).

Because AFN can have such a wide configuration of practices, it is important to consider the scale at which various AFN function and the kind of relations they generate. Thus, Renting et al. (2003) distinguish three categories of AFN based on the type of interaction created between consumer and producer. First, face-to-face AFNs have the component of a direct relationship based on trust between consumer and producer as the main premise. Examples of such AFNs are farmers market, box schemes, and pick your own. Secondly, there is proximate AFNs, in which the product is sold regionally, and the relation between producer and consumer is mediated by a third party that acts as a guarantor of the product quality or authenticity. Examples may include farm shops and regional hallmarks. Thirdly, the authors name the extended AFNs, as food beyond the regional place of origin, relying heavily on institutionalised certifications or labels as a guarantee for quality and particular practices in the production process (like organic or fair-trade practices). In this last category, the direct relation with the producer or the place of origin is not as important as the inscribed symbolic value translated by the label (Renting et al., 2003, p. 400).

Apart from classifying AFN based on the type of relations, it encompasses, Renting et al. (2003) propose two categories for quality definitions. As we will see in this analysis, the categories are particularly useful in understanding consumers and producers discourse revolving the value of food. The quality definitions are relevant to AFN because "the more embedded and differentiated a product becomes, the scarcer it becomes in the market." (Renting et al., 2003, p. 401) The first category emphasises the place of origin for the product or process of production, thus being local, artisanal or traditional is the main selling point. The second category refers to the bioprocess of production, incorporating ecological practices to respond to various environmental and safety concerns. This category also plays on the idealised understanding of traditional farming as more natural.

Alternative food networks are thought to be examples of moral economies (Thompson, 1971) based on the presumption of the logic of care and social embeddedness that transgress the purely utilitarian market interactions, by adding ethical considerations and feelings of solidarity (Psarikidou, 2012, p. 310). Hinrichs (2000) proposes the concepts of marketness and instrumentalism for evaluating the degree of social embeddedness of economic transactions (p. 297). Marketness refers to the extent to which price is the primary driver in economic interactions. Thus, when marketness is high, the only consideration in the decision-making process of the economic actors is the price. In contrast, when marketness is low, there are other considerations beyond price that influence actors' decisions (Hinrichs, 2000, p. 297). On the other hand, instrumentalism refers to the level that economic actors are motivated by the maximisation of their self-interest, as opposed to other non-economic goals. As Galt (2013) points out, social embeddedness should not be understood as an exclusion to any capitalist logic, thus creating a false dichotomy, but as a continuum that can characterise any market interaction, in one degree or another (p. 348).

1.2 Organic Certifications

The term "quality turn" (Goodman, 2003) is often put in relation to the proliferation of diverse alternative food networks. Increased public concerns over food safety and growing awareness about the destructive and harmful methods used in food production for both the environment and local communities have led to an increasing number of people seeking alternatives to conventional food production and demand more transparency.

The response to the increasing demand for food produced with ethical and ecological concerns was the creation of certified organic labels. This response

meant introducing an elaborate set of rules and standards overseen by third-party certification authorities that would allow the producer to access premium prices (Guthman, 2004, p. 514). Labelling often implies a considerable amount of paperwork, fees that cut into the farmers' margins, intrusive surveillance, periodical inspections and randomised sampling for testing in search or prohibited chemicals that might have been used. As Guthman (2004) points out, the cost of transitioning to organic agriculture has an exclusionary effect, keeping out those who cannot afford the costs. More than that, "what is fundamentally troubling about these proactive standards is that their efficacy turns on rents, the dynamics of which can undermine the behaviours that the standards are intended to produce" (p. 524). As result, organic labels have not managed to reform the global food system, resulting only in the commodification of social and environmental-friendly practices. If initially certificates were meant to offer more transparency to the consumer and build trust, they were slowly co-opted into corporate practice, which transformed them into another marketing tool.

Economic rents can be understood as surplus profits, or "over profits in the marketing of some products based on constructed scarcity" (Guthman, 2004, p. 512). The scarcity, in the case of organic certificated food, derives from the limited access of farmers to get certification due to the high costs and other logistical difficulties, but also because of the consumer-driven, high-value on certificated food, which is regarded as having properties that make it superior to conventionally produced food. In the case of Alternative food networks, especially those which produce a personal relationship between producers and consumers, like community-supported agriculture or Solidarity Purchase Groups, economic rents can be in the form of organic certifications, but could also emerge as a form of "community economic rent" understood as premium prices justified by the trust built through the direct relationship and the symbolic value attributed to food as being more local or grown through civic agriculture (Galt, 2013, p. 345).

This paper contributes to the literature on AFN by uncovering the narrative constructions people build around the food produced through un-conventional chains of food production, adding a more nuanced understanding of consumer's motivation for partaking in relations based on trust and social embeddedness.

2. Materials and Methods

This research aims to analyse an alternative distribution network in Romania to understand what factors determine both consumers and producers to participate in this type of alternative distribution chain as well as the nature of the relationship between producer and consumer and the discursive constructions regarding food. The research aims to answer one main research question: How is "alternative agriculture" understood by producers and consumers of a short food supply chain from Cluj-Napoca? Two additional sub-questions were posed to narrow the scope of the study:

a. How is the value of food constructed and on what grounds?
b. What drives consumers to assume these perspectives regarding the food they receive through this AFN?

A qualitative research method based on the technique of interview and secondary data analysis was carried out to answer these questions. A case study research strategy was used, and the subject of the case study is represented by a short distribution chain, called the Peasant's Box. Peasant's Box was established in 2012, and it operates in 10 counties of Romania with around 25 producers and a few hundred consumers. This network works by directly subscribing a consumer to a farm near the city, which prepares and delivers a weekly box of various seasonal foods obtained from the household.

This research is based on data analysis obtained through 14 interviews conducted over six months (December 2019 to May 2020). The interviews were held with producers, consumers and the project initiator: 6 producers from the counties of Cluj, Sibiu, and Timisoara, from which one was a former producer at Peasant Box, 6 consumers from Peasant Box, from Cluj and Constanta, from which 2 were former consumers and the rest active consumers, 1 consumer and also an activist for peasant rights from ASAT (The Association for supporting peasant agriculture), and

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Table 1. Interviews classified by current or former involvement in the AFN

	Consumer	Producer	Initiator	ASAT
Current	4	5	1	1
Former	2	1		

1 of the initiators from Peasant Box. The ASAT consumer offered great insights on how other such community-supported agriculture (CSA) projects are governed, enabling comparisons between the two. From the 14 interviews taken, 11 were with women and 3 with men. In the interviews' citation, the distinction is made by marking F for the women and M for the men. Obtaining the interviews was done in two ways: some of the respondents were introduced through the project initiator by request, while others were selected through snowball sampling method. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and most of them were done via phone or internet, as the COVID-19 lockdown was in place during the fieldwork.

The interviews were semi-structured, conducted based on an interview guide, specifically design for each actor interviewed: producer, consumer and initiator. The interview guide consists of five sections. (1) Introductory questions for the background of the interviewee, details about the farm, in the case of producers, and details on how they came to participate in this distribution chain; (2) Description of the exchange process and how the network functions in practice; (3) Details on the lived experience as part of the network; (4) Sections focused on the motivations for participation in this short food supply chain; (5) What are their relationship with consumer/producer. Secondary data was represented by pieces of information found on the online site dedicated to the project (https://cutiataranului.ro/), more precisely blog pieces, in which the political perspective of the initiators, as well as their vision for what the network should or could be, the list of rules for becoming a member/producer and the presentation of each producer and the box they offer.

3. Results

This chapter introduces the Peasant Box initiative, presenting the context of its inception, how it functions in practice and what rules and principles guide this type of alternative food network. Peasant Box (Cutia Țăranului) is a direct selling scheme between producers and consumers, which operates based on direct consumer subscription to a farm near the city that prepares and weekly delivers a box of various seasonal foods obtained in the household. The subscription is a long-term one, excluding the possibility of purchasing a box only once, precisely to encourage a direct relationship between consumer and producer. Also, the box value is not set strictly according to the market. Its content is diverse and reflects the production stages according to each season and the local varieties of vegetables or other products.

The community-supported agriculture (CSA) model is an alternative to the conventional food system, which connects the producer to the consumers, minimising the distribution chain, and consolidating long-lasting relationships between the two parties. It usually involves sharing the costs and risks of production by payment made at the beginning of the season and voluntary work done by consumers (Bîrhală & Möllers, 2014, p. 13). Peasant Box is presented by its initiators as a CSA project, although it differs from other such schemes in several ways. Peasant Box producers create diverse boxes (8-9 different products for the vegetable boxes, for example) that are also seasonal (with products grown in that season). The boxes are delivered periodically, having a fixed price but varied contents. The payment is made for each delivery, so in this regard, Peasant Box differs from other CSA schemes where the payment is made at the beginning of each season to offer the farmer the necessary capital to start the preparations, like buying seeds or necessary tools. Another particularity is that the delivery is made door-to-door by the producers on set days. Consumers are not involved in production or delivery, their role being minimal.

Peasant Box started in Cluj-Napoca in 2012, and to this day it has the largest number of producers from this area. However, in recent years it has also started to operate in other parts of the country (Timisoara, Iasi, Bucuresti, Sibiu). Its inception in Cluj-Napoca can be put in relation to several factors. First of all, Cluj-Napoca is one of Romania's largest cities, with a strong economic growth that has made it a regional centre for industry and services in recent years. (Petrovici, 2013). The city development has attracted both capital and specialised workforce resulting in a growing middle-class population, which has both the resources and interest in quality food. Another factor contributing to the success of Peasant Box in Cluj-Napoca, is the existence of a historical population specialising in urban vegetable growing, more exactly the hostezeni population, which have supplied the city with fresh products for generations. Hostezeni were urban dwellers who grew vegetables at the city's periphery, selling it in the local farmer's markets. They are thought to originate in the XVI century and provided food for the city until the 1980s when many were expropriated as the city expanded and their land was needed for new apartment buildings (Deac, Irimuș, & PĂCURAR, 2013). Very few hostezeni still practice agriculture today, and some are part of the Peasant Box network.

"We are proud to be able to continue the tradition of hostezeni inherited from our parents and to keep alive the memory of this tradition. Hostezeni are legendary farmers of Cluj - they always had fresh and quality goods (vegetables, wine, milk and of course sauerkraut according to a traditional recipe), they knew how to take care of their land and were respected over time." (Producer, online presentation).

Lastly, the Peasant Box project must be put in relation with the activist organisation for peasant rights Eco Ruralis of which the initiators, as well as some producers, are part. Eco Ruralis, which has its headquarters in Cluj-Napoca, is the largest organisation that fights for food sovereignty and peasant rights in Romania, engaging with advocacy work on issues such as land grabbing, agricultural subventions and traditional seed preservation. Apart from being the space where the platform was first initiated, the organisation also offers great support by promoting their initiative.

The online site makes some explicit requirements to be met to become a producer for Peasant Box. The first requirement is to have a good relationship with the earth. This formulation suggests that the project has the issue of agroecology in sight, and it does promote an alternative model of agriculture that is not based on intensive, industrialised methods, but rather on more traditional, or ecological practices. Still, the formulation is interpretable, leaving much room for projecting personal ideas to define a good relationship with the earth. In fact, Peasant Box does not impose one vision on what a good relationship might be, so the rule does not refer so much to a strict set of parameters that can be evaluated, but more to a set of principles or values that the peasant should adopt. The formulation remains vague and leaves each peasant to make up their own understanding of what it can mean for them.

By not imposing a strict standard, the initiators maintain a horizontal relationship with the farmers, allowing them the space to self-define the kind of agriculture they practice. It also brings awareness to the limitations of formalised organic certifications, that work as a form of gatekeeping due to the high cost and over-complicated paperwork. Thus, instead of having a state or private authority decides on the type of agriculture they practice and on the perceived quality of their goods, the platform leaves the definition to be constructed through negotiation by consumers and producers. More than that, this approach pushes for consolidation of a direct relationship between consumers and producers, who are bound to communicate. The producers have to be transparent, and the consumer gets involved in gaining knowledge about the production process. This act increases their awareness about an invisible process embedded in the food they are eating, which further increases the consideration for the producer. The food received is not just a product anymore; it is the result of a year-long process of nurturing and care, a process which is now exposed for the consumer to acknowledge. Suppose in the conventional food system, the supermarket's food has "no story to tell", in the sense that its origin and the stages of manufacture are invisible to the consumer. In that case, the food from this network contains the story of production.

The producers at Peasant's Box fall roughly under two categories. First, some producers have been farmers

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for most of their lives who continue to work on their family's land. This category of "traditional peasants" sell their food at the farmer's market and have a larger area of land producing for Peasant's Box, but also the market. Having been practising agriculture for a long time, the producers in this category had the necessary knowledge and did not need any assistance from the initiators. They also seem more concerned with making ends meet, discussing more practical issues of delivery and production. Moreover, producers from this category discussed, to a lesser extent, issues regarding agroecology or environmental concerns, framing the discussion about food more in terms of being obtained from traditional or small-scale agriculture.

The second category of producers is represented by people originally from urban areas, from middle-class positions, who have migrated to villages and started producing food. Producers from this category usually have a much more romanticised discourse about living in the country. They talk more about having a life away from stress, a much healthier and more natural lifestyle than their previous lifestyle.

"We really like this way of life, and this freedom to be in nature, to breathe fresh air and not be stressed. We've lived in these office jobs for years, where you go to work, then you come home and then you start all over again the next day. And then I realised, we don't want it anymore, we want to be free to make our lives the way we desire, and on top of that we also gain health from it." (Producer, F).

They are also more likely to be concerned about the food quality and aspects of biodiversity and ecological issues, which is reflected by their use of permaculture principles. Although many were novice agricultures who had to learn how to care for their plants and animals or plan their seeding and harvesting, producers from this category tended to look down on peasants lacking agroecological knowledge. They regarded peasants from their village as not cultivated enough on matters of ecological food production, the dangers of insecticides or how to grow novel varieties of plants. This differentiation between traditional and ecological practices shows a multiplicity of discourses and understanding of alternative agriculture. The project does not impose only one vision, offering space for a multiplicity of practices that can fall under the "alternative" umbrella.

Consumers expressed a very positive outlook on the project and the idea behind it, appearing to be satisfied with both the food received and the interactions with the producers. Consumers' motivations for participating in the network revolve around health and food safety concerns on the one hand, but also concerns about the fairness of the food system and an interest in supporting their community through their consumption choices. As one consumer said, "We were interested in two things, first to be not necessarily organic, but as healthy as possible and secondly to support these small, local producers" (Consumer, F).

Climate concerns were rarely mentioned as a motivation factor, and when mentioned, it was implicit only in the belief that it is important to have shorter distribution chains. "I wanted to stop buying vegetables from the supermarket to shorten the transport chain because at the supermarket products come from all over the world"(Consumer, F). The first primary motivation, related to health, was discussed more by consumers with children. The concern for food safety emerged when they became parents and became self-conscious about the origin of food and the dangers that mass-produced food might pose.

The ethical motivation of eating more locally, to protect the livelihoods of marginalised, small food producers, was addressed to a smaller extent by the consumers interviewed, but it was still an important motivation. The consumers referred to the unfairness in the food system and how big food retailers were profiting while at the same time offering low-quality food.

"I prefer to support and help someone local and who is personally involved in the production than the big retailers because you don't know where their product comes from, you don't know where it's going. That's why we don't support these very big retailers and we don't supply ourselves from the supermarket." (Consumer, F).

4. Discussion

4.1 Discourse about clean food

Food is never just food; it is a central part of daily life; it is at the centre of many human institutions and practices, and the focus of many political battles. When assessing the qualities of food, people incorporate their conceptual constructions in addition to physical properties, also symbolic or moral components. Before presenting the discursive constructions of Peasant Box consumers and producers regarding food, it is necessary to define the qualities of good food.

Food is considered "good" by virtue of possessing certain physical characteristics that set it apart from the food present in the conventional distribution chain. The most indicative quality invoked by all consumers when discussing food quality is taste, regarded as superior, more authentic, and caring great resemblance to the foods they had in their childhood (Watts, Ilbery, & Maye, 2005, p. 29).

They are made in the countryside, and I think they are made as our grandparents did. The food has a different taste, and I think they do not add any chemicals, or they don't spray the vegetables very much, as they produce food in small quantities. (Consumer, F) The produce's good taste is contrasted with the lack of taste of store-bought food. Visual qualities complemented the sensory experience of taste. Aesthetical aspects also contributed to the belief that the food was better than the mass-produced counterparts - the tomatoes were not perfect, the carrots had mud on them. The unattractiveness of the vegetables was a sign of authentically grown food on the earth. Being "ugly" was considered a positive quality that marks the product's authenticity; it is an image constructed in antithesis, again, with the supermarket products that have appealing aesthetic qualities but lack good taste.

"How can I tell you, you can see that the products are not standard, they still have stains and they spoil very quickly, from one week to the next, and what I bought from the store a month ago is still there, unspoiled. It has good taste. It is clear that they are homemade. "(Consumer, F).

Apart from the physical qualities, "good food" incorporates a series of moral or symbolic qualities related to its production. Thus, the food is thought to encapsulate values of respect towards the earth and biodiversity, being obtained through agro-ecological practices.

"We like it because it is fresh, relatively seasonal products from authentic local producers. We kind of know the conditions in which they make them. But they also have a different taste, you really feel that there is something really grown in the garden without a lot of herbicides and substances added." (Consumer, F).

The food is also thought to enclose the value of the hard work put in by the peasant. The close relationships formed between the peasant and the family they provide also offer the food a symbolic value that goes beyond the strictly physical quality.

"You know that someone invested his attention, his effort, a part of his soul and his experience is there. It's not something someone did on the conveyor belt, that's how I feel. The producer puts something there, and I feel that I receive more than just the product." (Consumer, F).

The food grown by the peasants at Peasant Box is mostly not certified organic; nevertheless, consumers do not perceive the food they receive to be similar to store-bought food. The term "clean food" is particularly used in place of organic or bio, which would only be possible based on a certification. Clean food can mean different things, as some people emphasise non-invasive agriculture practices, while others highlighted production by small semi-subsistence farmers. The lack of a clear definition leaves every actor to build their own constructive narrative around the food and the value it represents. It also leaves room for adopting practices that are not placed under strict parameters, which accounts for the possibilities of every producer to best manage their production. For example, some producers implement principles of permaculture in their production, while others rely on traditional methods. Some producers have micro-productions that offer them the possibility of tending the garden manually, while others use technology to work their field. Lastly, it also accounts for the moral economy in which Peasant Box functions, that cannot be regulated or standardised without losing its meaning and purpose.

The two discursive constructions built around food,

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using the Renting et al. (2003) classification of food quality definitions, are based on place of origin or the bioprocess of production. The first identified discourse is about authentic food from the country. Consumers and producers value the food on the merit of being grown in the village by the peasants, constituting an idealised rural life image. In this discursive form, a romanticisation of the rural space develops, which is seen to be intrinsically pure, good, and valuable. Thus, the image of the Romanian village becomes a mythical construction that incorporates moral meanings about a desirable way of life.

Being grown by peasants gives food from the Peasant Box an intrinsic value, making it more beneficial in the eye of the consumer. It is considered that the food from the peasants is produced through traditional methods, which offer food qualities beyond the physical ones, such as the capacity to preserve a rural way of life. It should be noted that these traditional methods are not clearly explained. Hence, they remain an ideal construction of the correct production and consumption of food rather than clearly stated practices. The authenticity of the products becomes an important aspect when choosing what to buy. Consumers worry about such authenticity when going to the peasant market, fearing not being able to tell which food comes from the peasants and which does not and hence not knowing which food possesses the symbolic value of being from the country or grown by small farmers. As a result, Peasant Box is preferred for giving the consumer the certainty about the place of origin.

"Well, in a way it's easier to go to the market, and when I go, I'm careful to take from local producers, but you don't always know where the respective products are from (…) it's more reliable to buy through Peasant Box and you don't have to ask questions about what you buy, from whom you took it, how it was transported." (Consumer, F).

This type of discourse idealises the countryside, essentialising certain features considered inherent to what country life means, such as subsistence living, the relationship with the land, and traditional knowledge. It is interesting to see that "peasant" or "rural", which can have negative societal connotations, is seen positively, denoting purity and authenticity. Adding to this discourse about authentic taste is the idea of food that tastes like childhood, mobilising subjective understandings and feelings of nostalgia.

"I grew up with these products, and they are very dear to me, I remember how my grandmother made them. My husband didn't grow up in the country at all and he doesn't know these products, but he also says that they are tastier." (Consumer, F).

The second discourse around food is constructed on the quality of being natural. Many consumers and producers regard the food from Peasant Box as better on the ground of being produced with non-invasive methods by not using pesticides or insecticides or using natural fertilisers, not artificial ones. "They are not spectacular, and it can be seen that they are not produced industrially; it is natural and tastes good." (Consumer, F) It is also referred to as not being heavily processed, compared to food from conventional distribution networks. Being natural also plays on an idea about nature as an essential category, which encompasses purity.

4.2 Discourse on organic certification

Consumer and producer thoughts about the value of food from Peasant Box and how it is conceptualised beyond standards and prescriptions on what defines good or safe food have been presented. In the absence of an official attestation of product quality, meanings about what food represents are created within the network, going beyond measurable qualities and include subjectively defined properties, like having an authentic taste, tasting like childhood, or being more natural.

In terms of certificates, the platform's initiators take an unequivocal stand, deeming an external authority's intervention to decide what is and what is not valuable as unnecessary. "These questions imply the presumption that food regulated and monitored by central authorities in the food industry is safe. Is this really true? I would say no, it's not." (Peasant Box, online blog) Thus, the platform is critical towards certificates, which are seen as an intrusive form of instrumentalisation of governmental power that is disruptive to the lives of small producers. They show how food industry regulations are created as a consequence of a food system driven by the desire for rising profits and falling costs, which characterises corporate agriculture. They

also draw attention to the difference in scale when discussing the producers from Peasant's Box, considering that small farmers have a direct relationship with the land and the people they sell to, so their motivation goes beyond a strictly utilitarian one. Thus, the initiators position themselves in favour of increasing trust by cultivating a direct relationship between producer and consumer. Consumers are invited to get directly involved in how the food is produced, i.e., to ask the producer, visit the farms, and communicate with the producer when something is not right.

There are no guarantees, the responsibility falls on all of us, including those who choose to join a box. If you really care about the quality of the food that is delivered to you, the Peasant's Box is actually an opportunity to do something about it. We encourage you to be careful and ask about the quality of the products you receive and then make informed decisions. "(Peasant Box Blog).

Interviews with consumers show that most are not interested in organic certificates, which are not considered decisive to food quality. From the consumers' perspective, the quality of products resides from an intersection of meanings regarding food. It is not limited to physical characteristics, including elements related to the symbolic value of food. Some consumers also point out that the certificates do not necessarily provide confidence, there being a dose of scepticism about their veracity.

"They don't promise you on the site that they are organic, eco and it doesn't matter as much as the fact that they are produced locally. I trusted that the food is ok, I also met the gentleman who cultivates it. Even at the supermarket, you don't necessarily have the guarantee, even if they are certified, you can't be sure, that they are the most eco-friendly products. But the food is good and tasty." (Consumer, F).

One consumer expressed that asking for certificates would go against the partnership principles, transforming the relations between consumer and producers into something more than simple market exchange. "I did not ask for certificates, actively not. Because that's part of the idea of a customer checking their seller." (Consumer, M).

The fact that organic certificates are not required by clients, who trust that the food is "clean" without the need for legitimacy from outside authorities is, of course, a benefit for producers, who can avoid additional costs and a long and complicated process of certification. When asked about obtaining organic certificates, the producers spoke primarily about their difficulties in obtaining them and the complicated procedures and standards. More generally, they spoke about the unpleasant experiences they had with state authorities, which created a great feeling of distrust, that added to their resistance to getting certificated.

"I also have relatives and friends in other countries, where there is talk of much greater support from the state. Besides, the authorities, and believe me, I know what I am talking about, when they come to control, they come to give fines, they also told us 'if we don't give fines, we are considered incompetent.' And there is nothing more to say." (Producer, F).

4.3 Building trust

Since producers are not urged to provide organic certificates to prove that the food they sell is produced with methods that are as minimally invasive as possible reveals the consumers' trust by virtue of the close relationship they develop. This status allows farmers to sell at premium prices as a form of "community economic rent" (Galt, 2013, p. 345), counteracting the exclusionary effect of certificates. Yet, it remains to be seen how trust is built and what makes the members of the Peasant's Box consider that the food they receive is as it is presented.

First, consumers motivate their confidence through their own sensory experience, namely through the taste of food. As reported, food has an authentic, true taste, as they remember from childhood, which gives them confidence that the food they eat is not industrially produced or imported. Apart from this aspect, consumers trust that food is safe because farmers consume their own products, which denotes that it is a safe and quality food. The following quote perfectly shows how trust is built and the extent to which a close relationship is necessary to make such networks work based on trust.

"There was a situation once when she brought us the

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"zacusca" [traditional Romanian speciality] that was spoiled, and I forgot to call her, to see what to do about it. And the lady came and asked us if the "zacusca" had been spoiled, that they had opened one can. I said yes, and that I forgot to tell her and she said she would bring me another one. So, it was a very nice gesture, there was no conflict, she didn't make us prove it or anything, she just brought us another one." (Consumer, F).

The interviewee expressed that they trusted the food to be good, without harmful chemicals based on this interaction because of two reasons. First, it was evident that the producers also consume the food, so it must be safe to eat, trusting the producers would not put their own family at risk. Secondly, the trust in the producer grew because the farmer contacted them when they found a spoiled batch, showing transparency and willingness to ensure consumer satisfaction. Trust is an essential element of the relationship between the participants of a CSA that is necessary for the function of this type of projects (Thorsøe & Kjeldsen, 2016). What sets apart the relationship through this network is the fact that it is kept informal. Moreover, the non-existence of a contract and, therefore, the informality of the relationship creates a trust that is significantly more important in the operation of the Peasant's Box.

Because being in a long-term relationship, it's not like at the market, where when someone buys something from you, you see them once and then never again. As a producer at Peasant's Box, you have weekly or monthly deliveries, and you get to see your clients again and again so you can't lie because if you cheat, they will still feel in the taste of the product. If you do your job, things go well on their own. (Producer, F)
No legal obligations are made, and at no point is the consumer obliged to keep their subscription, nor is the producer obliged to deliver anything in particular. Yet, without a formalised agreement, most of the partnerships have remained functioning for years. The informal aspect is backed by the initiators who view it as a central aspect in making the relationship more than a simple market exchange.

Transparency is an important aspect when building trust, so the producers make great efforts to make their production process as visible as possible for the consumers. The platform also encourages customers to be as involved as possible in maintaining this close relationship and questioning the production process.

5. Conclusions

The study has shown how the added value of food received through Peasant Box is perceived and how this type of network challenges an assumption regarding what good food is and how quality is defined. It is important to note that under the umbrella of alternative food networks, a multitude of organisation and governing practices differ in the degree of integration into the conventional distribution network. They must be understood as not falling into a distinct category from conventional networks but as being more or less integrated into them. When talking about alternative food networks, as many have pointed out (Corsi et al., 2018, p. 307), one should not assume that alternativeness automatically equals better or just. Thus, it is crucial to see to what extent these networks manage to challenge the logic of an economy based on globalisation, commodification and intensive industrialisation. As discussed, if organic or fair-trade certificates are thought of as a way to address the shortcomings of the global food system, tackling issues related to sustainability and social justice, they can just as quickly become instrumental for actors who use them as a form of limitation to form false rarity. Thus, we see that certificates do not manage to change the problematic practices existing in the food system but create a niche that can be exploited.

This paper demonstrates how these short networks counteract the exclusionary effects of certificates by re-introducing close relationships based on the trust between consumers and producers, addressing issues beyond food safety and environmental protection to include issues related to the principles underlying the exchange. It is important to remark that alternative food networks are not a monolith of practices, so researching them is important to consider the scale of the network and the level of social embeddedness, which can affect the network's underlying governing principles.

Thus, in the absence of imposed definitions regarding quality, people create their own rhetoric about what defines food as good. The food in this network is un-

derstood to be valuable both by the physical and the symbolic qualities it possesses. The discursive constructions regarding clean food were also discussed: the food authenticity, produced by peasants on the one hand, and the foods' more natural characteristics seen as healthier.

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Conflict of interest

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