

Commodified Meanings, Meaningful Commodities: Re-thinking Production-Consumption Links through the Organic System of Provision

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The increasingly apparent risks and outright failures of industrialized and globalized food provision seem to be leaving a bad taste in many mouths of the global North. A veritable, if still lagging, shift in consumption trends suggests a broadened politicization of food. In that way, Starbucks' introduction of a Fair Trade Blend, the enviable success of Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001), the ongoing regulatory battles over GMO labeling, and the remarkable media coverage of the 30th anniversary of Berkeley California's *Chez Panisse*¹ are all cut from the same cloth. There is little doubt that this emerging politics feeds on the centrality of food, as both biological necessity and cultural linchpin of human social life.

Agro-food researchers have written much on these trends, as well as trenchant critiques of agro-food industrialization, but have yet to systematically theorize how the social life of food intersects with a political economy of food production. Yet without such understanding, activists who draw on this research (whether or not explicitly) are unlikely to affect the politics of production in intended ways. Consider, for example, the notion of good taste, which immediately conjures up two different senses: that of yumminess and that of highly classed and gendered forms of social control. Indeed, taste, despite its connotation of sentience, is as social as it is natural; it also can be a source of exclusion if a certain aesthetic is commodified based on scarcity, for example. It seems crucial, then, to understand how the meanings that animate the politics of consumption are translated and distributed as surplus value and rent, and, for that matter, how surplus value and rent value are translated into meanings. This paper is an attempt to further that understanding, with a particular focus on organic food provision.

As I have written about elsewhere, there is a phenomenal disjuncture between representations of organic agriculture and the political economy of organic food provision (Guthman 1998, forthcoming a, forthcoming b). Specifically, organic meanings have almost necessarily been de-stabilized to grow the organic market, greatly affecting the distribution of value (and ecological metabolism) from

soil to sewer. The construction and enforcement of organic meanings through the regulatory process have been central to this process, creating a number of opportunities for rent-seeking.² On the one hand, rent has allowed small scale producers to prosper in otherwise inhospitable markets; on the other hand, it is based on legally constructed barriers to entry (in the form of organic certification) and socially constructed preciousness, hardly a recipe for the spread of sustainable agriculture. Furthermore, since rents are the more ephemeral portion of profits, they are inherently dynamic, potentially shifted to other actors in systems of provision, or ratcheted down altogether in periods of intense competition. In that way, organic production is implicated in the mechanisms by which all growers are pushed to intensify land and labor productivity (See Buck et al. 1997).

Drawing on these insights, the focus of this paper is more theoretical; its purpose, that is, is to help forge analytical links between food production and food consumption. Particularly, I want to examine the conversion of tastes into commodities (as well as the reverse), to suggest the implications of these translations for a politics of consumption. Acknowledging that my premise is based on contested ontological underpinnings, the first section of the paper is devoted to methodological issues, writ as specific amendments to the system of provisions framework. Following that, I consider some recent interventions in taste, in an effort to fill some lacunae of commodity systems research. I then explore, albeit schematically, the significance of different senses of taste for value creation and distribution. The last part of the paper applies these insights to organic food provision more specifically. Ultimately, I argue that various tastes for organic food present considerable problems for the commodification of organic food, which are only resolved by a re-making of organic meanings together with unintended distributions of value.

On linking production and consumption

Analytical links between production and consumption were first sown in the field of commodity studies. The seedling was Friedland's (1984) path-breaking work in "commodity systems analysis," which focused on the mutual interaction (and determination) of production practices, grower organization, labor, science and extension, and marketing and distribution systems on the production of agricultural commodities. Others grafted onto this schema other influences on production, such as state regulation (Dixon 1997), or extended it (as with commodity chains) to further highlight the vertical "slice" of a given product's trip from design and inputs to consumption (see, for example, Fine and Leopold 1994; Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1994; Hopkins and Wallerstein 1994; Fine et al. 1996). Concurrently, a number of empirical accounts of individual commodities emerged, with Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1985) and Friedland's *Manufacturing Green Gold* (1981), having been seminal in this regard.

While individual commodity studies have told different stories, most share with their methodologically-focused counterparts an implicit critique of capital.³ Clearly, the justification for scrutinizing a commodity borrows from Marx's notion of commodity fetishism: the necessary masking of the social relations under which commodities are produced from which capitalist commodity production gains much of its legitimacy (see for example, Hartwick 1998). The observation that

society-nature relations are equally concealed in commodity production has only added to the analytical purchase of this notion (Allen and Kovach 2000). What the commodity chain methodology brings to bear in particular is an unprecedented focus on the geography of Marx's $M - C - M'$ transactions – money transformed into commodity and back to money again. Investigating the movement of the commodity from farm to table (and possibly further), that is, can illustrate where value is added, appropriated, and distributed, including any value extracted from nature. Still, aside from Sweetness and Power, little has been done (at least in earlier works) to integrate metabolic consumption into the methodology; the chain always ends at purchase.

Fine first threw down the gauntlet regarding the necessity to make systematic links between food production and consumption. His systems of provision framework, a methodology heavily indebted to commodity systems analysis (with little acknowledgment, as noted by Watts (1994)), gives centrality to the uniqueness of any given commodity in shaping its provision and, hence, its consumption (Fine 1994; Fine and Leopold 1994; Fine et al. 1996; Fine 1998). He brings two further insights to the commodity system approach. One is that food systems are thoroughly dependent on agriculture and particularly land as a major factor of production. Consequently, the historically contingent ways in which landed property intervenes into the accumulation process and the various ways that rents are appropriated influences both the scale and intensity of accumulation (Fine 1994). The other is that food systems are shaped by the organic (i.e., biological) content of the food in question at all instances along the commodity chain.⁴ Therefore, all systems of provision are necessarily affected by the metabolic processes of eating and digestion.

Despite these insights, Fine's repeated efforts to link the production and consumption of food have proven disappointing. His insistence that consumption can only be understood in the context of any given commodity chain – his emphasis on verticality – tells us little about why people eat certain foods. Moreover, he fails to tie even the above two contributions in a satisfying way. To be sure, the rent relationship matters, as do all the particularities about agricultural production more generally. But how does that square with the particularities of food as a commodity? How does taste, or the cultural economy of food more broadly, interface with this system of provisioning? Fine is, as Watts said, "strong on political economy, weak on Nature (the organic) and weakest on what one might call the efficacy of the cultural-symbolic" (1994, p. 569).

More recent and concerted efforts at understanding consumption have elaborated on this critique. First, there is the problem of verticality and what that suggests about the pre-determination of taste. Fine promises that examining the particularity of any commodity chain unveils the secret of its consumption. By suggesting a top-down causality of taste, Fine does not improve on the taken-for-grantedness of taste rife in latter day social thought, where it is generally conceived of as either entirely pre-conscious or wholly structured by culture and/or social formation.⁵ Recent work suggests that taste is more hybrid. Korsmeyer (1999), for example, points to the cognitive elements of taste, that knowing what is being eaten through visual cues, for instance, is key to the taste experience even as biophysical sensation. This position gives more agency to taste, at the same time that it forces recognition that what people believe about what they eat shapes how it goes down. Taste, it can therefore be surmised, is necessarily individual and social, gate-keeping and learned, and

neither wholly structured nor wholly chosen.

The second problem is Fine's failure to incorporate food idioms in the system of provision framework, an unacceptable oversight in any theory of consumption. For this reason, Friedland (2001) has recently appended the idea of 'commodity culture' to the commodity systems framework, suggesting that beliefs about certain commodities may also play a determinative role in their production (more so with certain commodities than others, he claims). While this is useful as far as appendices go, Dixon's (1997) cultural economy approach seems a more integrative corrective to Fine's lacunae, and, for that matter, to the commodity chain framework as a whole. Recognizing how production has largely been relegated to the purview of economics with its privileging of material explanation and consumption the purview of anthropology with its current favoring of the symbolic (also see section on "Re(constituting) economic geographies" in Lee and Wills 1997), Dixon aptly points to how production (the creation of value) is too often understood as that which happens at the factory (or field) while consumption (the sharing of meanings) is that which happens within the household. Accordingly, there is a methodological and conceptual break when the consumer arrives home to cook the food; value added thereafter is not counted as work, adding a clear gender dimension to the problematic, as well. Alternatively, she says, we need to acknowledge both production within the household and non-market exchanges in the whole chain of provision, including "the trade in representations and the processes of transferring symbolic value" (Dixon 1997, p. 152).

The third problem triangulates from the two others. It is Fine's failure (ironically enough) to address the simultaneity of food's symbolic and biological dimensions ('at all instances along the chain'), replicating a methodological dualism between nature and culture. FitzSimmons and Goodman's (1998) recognition of the com-metabolism of symbolic and corporeal nourishment that reproduces human subjects and human bodies (also Goodman 1999) at the site of consumption enriches and extends Dixon's schema even further, by noting how even the ingestion of food is about production as well as shared meaning. The insight that food sustains both laboring bodies and thinking subjects integrates two separate senses of social reproduction (in the classic literature) into a unified process.

So far so good. This, however, brings us to a fourth criticism, which is that the systems of provision approach privileges human agency above all others', such that food appears only to be acted on by humans. The focus of actor network theory (ANT) on mutual enrollment (Law 1992) – the idea that certain foods may beckon us – would seem to push even further in explaining taste. Certainly, Pollan's *Botany of Desire* (2001) makes such a case, albeit to a less quibbling audience, by arguing that good taste is part of a plant's reproductive strategy. While the emphasis on actancy seems useful, the network approach seems to de-populate the processes of translation and enrollment, thereby flattening the power relations implicit to these processes. In particular, the network effaces the critique of capital for which the commodity chain is so powerful. Not to throw out the baby with the bath water, the notion of a chain, for all of its simplification, allows the overlay of M - C - M' sequences, and, for that matter, illustrates relationships where commodification is absent. Yet it does not disable the methodological incorporation of nature, which can broadly brought to bear through ideas of metabolism (Smith 1984; Benton

1989) and economized, so to speak, via rent (see Guthman 2001). Nor does it preclude the observation of two way traffic between nodes, a traffic that is central to bio-symbolic production and reproduction. So at the risk of bastardizing ANT, here I borrow the notion of translation to think about these cartographies of conversion from meaning to economic value and back again.

Thinking taste

Duly placed in the ontological minefield, I want to give more consideration to taste, as one site where meanings are attributed to and derived from food. Taste is arguably the gatekeeper of consumption, as both sensation and performance. Yet it surely ramifies in production and exchange, making it critical to this analysis. No doubt the field is much larger than what I review here; by limiting it so, I hope to make more progress in the larger theoretical project outlined above.

Reflexive taste

Much of the recent literature on taste assumes informed choice on the part of the eater. In a recent article, DuPuis (2000), for example, takes issue with the commodity chain approach to consumption, precisely for its privileging of structural forces in shaping food choice. Drawing from Beck's (1992) concept of reflexive modernization, she discusses how consumer reflexivity undergirds recent growth in non-rBGH and organic milk. But, as she says, "a reflexive consumer is not a social activist, nor is he or she necessarily committed to a particular political point of view" (DuPuis 2000, p. 289). Her point is to distinguish reflexivity from the realm of deliberate struggle, with the latter's implication of structural reaction to an imposed food system. Rather, she seeks to re-ignite a broader sense of agency in the realm of consumption choices, reflected in knowledge-seeking, evaluation, and discernment.

The question is whether this notion of taste is at all generalizable to "mass" consumption. To the contrary, implicit to notions of reflexivity is that mass tastes are pre-determined, unreflective, and based on a cultural economy of food to which the reflexive eater objects (Guthman forthcoming b).⁶ This arguably elite sense of reflexivity is replicated in other recent work on the politics of consumption. The purpose of what Cook and Crang (1996) call "biographies of production and distribution" is to make multiple commodity circuits identifiable, connected, and/or transparent, as a partial effort to politicize them (also Hartwick 1998; Hartwick 2000). While consumer knowledge about commodities allows consumers to exercise their preferences (Arce and Marsden 1994, p. 303), such knowledge is also, as Crang (1996) points out "liable to be utilised in consumption as coinages in processes of cultural and social distinction" (p. 57).

Discerning taste

Korsmeyer's (1999) explorations in the aesthetics of taste also give centrality to reflexivity, but in a different sense. Her purposes are threefold: 1) to understand the sensation of taste, particularly the cognitive elements that translate sensation into

awareness and then knowledge; 2) to consider how taste has received such short shrift compared to vision and hearing in the realm of aesthetics,⁷ and 3) to explore the under-told aesthetic of food through two key sources: artistic representations of the visual feast and the gastronomic literature.

While engaging in a different debates, it is striking that Korsmeyer also introduces themes of judgement and discernment, qualities that are similarly suggestive of elite (and highly gendered) notions of appreciation. As she insinuates, visual feasts privilege the 'objective', masculine sense of sight, elevating food to the clearly aesthetic. More to the point, this sort of reflexive eating is too easily contrasted with gluttony, also a mark of the uncultured, undiscerning classes. One only need look to the historical literature of gastronomie itself, with its moral positioning as a model of discipline, control, and moderation, often contrasted with gourmandizing, and its connotation eating eagerly and to excess (Ferguson 1998, p. 608). In Ferguson's words, "the gastronome could even be considered something of a philosopher-diner", "the antithesis", that is, "of the unreflective eater whose lack of control led to [] gluttony" (p. 609, italics mine).

The equation of class differentiation with an increasingly refined (and less physically needy) sense of taste is a recurrent theme in the food history literature (Burnett 1966; Mennell 1986; Levenstein 1993; Toussaint-Samat 1994, original 1987). At the extreme, as Toussaint-Samat says, "people with access to too much good food eventually become obsessed with putting less and less on their plates" (p. 5), a point that is echoed by Bourdieu (1984). In other words, the taste of distinction is founded on the supersession of symbolic use value of food over material use value, and arguably, the aesthetic over the metabolic need. Aspects of this sense of taste appear in the rhetoric of the well meaning Slow Food movement (see Miele and Murdoch 2002). While steering clear of the idea of starvation as a mark of distinction, the slogan of "preserving the heritage of taste" speaks volumes.⁸

Mediating taste

Along with reflexivity, it is equally striking that notions of antinomy and paradox are replete in the literature on taste and food (for example, Burnett 1966; Levenstein 1993; Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Warde 1997). This preoccupation is partly explained by food studies' roots in linguistic structuralism, Levi-Strauss's 'The Raw and the Cooked' being the best case in point. While such thinking has come under critique for its timelessness (Mennell 1986), the fact is that food, much more than other commodities, has the ability to both strongly entice and strongly repel (Beardsworth and Keil 1997) at the same time that either over- or under-indulgence can be life-threatening (Mennell 1986). (Can one use too many or too few widgets?) The apparent need to mediate polarities suggests that taste operates as a sort of doorkeeper to bodily or emotional manifestation, be it revulsion, wasting, or satisfied fullness. Taste regulates appetite, albeit imperfectly, to both social norms and bodily need.

This mediating role is more finely argued in Beardsworth and Keil's (1992) study of vegetarianism. They name three paradoxes of eating: 1) that food provides gustatory pleasure and satiety at the same time that it can produce gustatory displeasure, dyspepsia, nausea, or vomiting; 2) that food is required for vigour, energy and

health while it can also introduce illness or disease; and 3) that food is required for the continuation of life although it entails death of the organisms consumed – the classic omnivore’s paradox. In each of these paradoxes, vegetarianism plays a mediating role; particularly it assuages the bodily anxieties of the first two paradoxes and the moral qualms of the third (Beardsworth and Keil 1992; cited in Beardsworth and Keil 1997, p. 152). In other words, the taste for vegetarianism lies in anxiety, particularly about the bio-physical properties of meat-based food. While not everyone chooses vegetarianism, suggesting that certain people may be more susceptible to certain biological effects of eating meat and/or more concerned with certain ethical problem, this framework can be generalized to consider other ways in which risk avoidance shapes taste. Food taboos emanate from cultural notions of moral risk, but food avoidance equally depends on both concern and knowledge that the element in question is somehow repulsive or will have bad effect. Such knowledge can be derived from personal experience, shared folk knowledge, or, increasingly, through science (Beck 1992). It often manifests in a taste for less “adulterated” food and/or a less repulsive alternative.

Legitimizing taste

Alan Warde’s (1997) recent work in the sociology of taste similarly draws from structural roots. He posits that tastes are developed to mediate anxieties about the social properties of food, i.e., its meanings. Specifically, Warde argues that guilt and unease exist around food because of what he identifies as four antinomies of taste: novelty and tradition, health and indulgence, economy and extravagance, and convenience and care. Each opposition states values which can legitimize food choice; their contradictoriness is indicative of profound structural anxieties of modernity: “the ambivalence of modern experience, a fetishism with body maintenance, the distribution of material resources, and gendered household relations” (Warde 1997, pp. 55-56). To this, I would add the antimony of nature and technics, with its corresponding angst about nature’s revenge on human manipulation of the environment.⁹

Warde’s framework is clearly the most generalizable as he seeks to explain a broad range of tastes, albeit still limited to “modern” societies where both sides of the polarity can be said to exist. His particular emphasis on symbolic use value suggests that material use values are safely met, although in bearing this emphasis, he effaces the importance of the sensate qualities of taste. Still, Warde tells us little about who is likely to have what kind of taste. While there are some class, race and gendered patterns in how these antinomies are mediated (e.g., professional classes tend toward self-surveillance), food choice remains fairly open. Taste, in this view, turns on the mediation of social anxiety and the creation of emotional security. The thrust of the argument, then, is the degree of subjectivity in taste (no matter what social grouping one belongs to) such that food choice is always modulated by at least some recognition of the anxiety involved (e.g., choosing to buy a TV dinner in recognition of not wanting to cook that night).

Translating Taste

While there is a good deal of overlap in these four senses of taste, particularly as

they overlay Warde's antinomies, conceivably each maps onto any given system of provision in different ways. To employ Dixon's framework, we would have to consider where value is added (and retained) in the translation of each of these tastes, whether or not a market exchange takes place, and simultaneously consider the trade in meanings in market transactions.

A good starting point might be the cultural economy of convenience, which has been widely considered in the agro-food literature. Clearly furthered by the huge influx of women into the paid work force, convenience food (e.g., take-out, TV dinners, etc) is a logical outcome of processes of appropriation and substitution, which both intensify on-farm production to factory like conditions and give more play to value-added processing in factories (Goodman and Redclift 1991). This can be broadly understood as a shift of value from peasant households to industrial capitals. It has simultaneously involved – at least theoretically – a reduction of women's unpaid labor in the home, as prepared food, not just food stuff is commodified. As Warde suggests, the trade in meanings is not unproblematic. Not producing enough care is a source of much anxiety for wage-earning women, so that one typical response is to add final 'homemade' flourishes to an already prepared meal. And, of course, the political economy is more complicated than that. For, 'freed' women's labor has been largely brought into settings where traditionally feminized labor is replicated (food processing, food service, textile production) at lower wages than perhaps what was received as a family wage in the Fordist era. Nonetheless, the taste for convenience (or its antinomy of care) provides a fairly clear example of what is at stake in the translation of meaning into value.¹⁰ In contrast, the antinomy of health and indulgence can cut both ways, thanks to a diet industry that has learned to commodify restraint (Fine 1998).

For the purposes of this paper, I would like to consider the translation of tastes that have not been so easily commodified, precisely because these are the ones that are relevant for a politics of consumption. So, here I consider the taste of reflexivity, where the symbolic value to be added is knowledge and/or trust; the taste of distinction, where the symbolic value is the aesthetic and/or rare; and the taste of simplicity where value added is transparency and/or avoidance. Drawing from all of these, I will then consider the taste for organics, and place it within Warde's antinomies. This exercise will necessarily be schematic and, at this point, can only be suggestive.

The value of knowledge/trust

A reflexive taste requires information. Information helps the consumer decide what to buy or eat; it also helps build trust. In distant markets (or for any sort of processed commodity), this information is often passed on a label; indeed, DuPuis' claims about reflexivity turn on the consumer's reading of the label. So the label is a means to commodify knowledge. Labeling, for instance, itemizes ingredients to give more information and may include formal guarantees of purity or quality. Labels may also mediate the antinomy of convenience and care: buying the 'right' product (e.g., natural cereal) in some sense allows the homemaker to trade her own value added labor for a purchase, without forsaking a sense of moral duty.

Yet, there have to be mechanisms of verification and enforcement for labels to

have substance. At the very least, verification should involve a third party and prices received should cover the cost of verification, adding another player in chain of provision who 'adds' value. This gives rise to a set of bureaucratic rents, and, hence, bureaucratic rent-seekers. More importantly, verification simultaneously constructs barriers-to-entry to protect existing producers and economic incentives to attract new producers. The creation of monopoly rents (in the form of created scarcity) points to the fundamental paradox of organic regulation, which, while designed to create more farm value, introduces a climate of competition that either erodes the rent or shifts it to other players (i.e., retailers). In California, for example, massive entry into the organic sector by growers seeking more value has seen the price premiums that organic growers once enjoyed substantially diminished, while retail prices for organically produced foods remain high (Guthman forthcoming b; Guthman forthcoming a).

Verification presents major dilemmas with a commodity (e.g. Fair Trade coffee) that is not meant to be precious, but to ensure value stays with the producer. Short of reduced profits by retailers and roasters, the Fair Trade commodity chain entails a transfer of value earned from First World latte sippers to Third World peasants. While this is a partial solution to the cheap food problem, it may easily get wrapped up with affected notions of coffee taste should it follow the idiomatic trajectory of organic food.

The value of distinction

Like the value of reflexivity, the taste for distinction is wrapped up in scarcity, although, in the latter case, perhaps, scarcity more directly serves the purpose. Scarcity allows rent-seeking from farm (or fishery, forest) to paid food preparer, based in the intrinsic monopoly conditions of 'good taste' as evident in the language of 'high value' produce and 'niche' markets. One need not buy into the Veblenian ideas of conspicuous consumption to accept the possibility that preciousness is the basis of the aesthetic. In many instances, this preciousness is purchased in a good restaurant.

Now that ecological farming ideas have come into favor among high end restaurateurs, the trade in value and symbol is particularly intriguing, as exemplified in the politically ambiguous Chez Panisse, whose founder, Alice Waters, began the trend in purchasing locally grown, organic produce. Typically, the restaurant makes a personal contact with the grower and pays an extraordinary high price for the food commodity in exchange for beauty and 'quality'. Some of the grower's 'surplus' may be passed onto labor, if, for instance, care in growing aesthetically perfect food is manufactured through higher wages (always, of course, mediated by local labor market conditions). Often it is partially retained by the grower who is often a gentleman farmer of sorts, albeit hard-working, amidst the multitude of commodity crop growers. At the same time, some of this value may be shifted into ground rent (see Guthman forthcoming a), for it is often that case that peri-urban farms cater to restaurants precisely to meet costs to land, eventually diminishing on-farm value retention.

Meanwhile, back at the restaurant, value is added with highly-skilled restaurant labor, in food preparation, display, and – one hopes – impeccable service. In turn, presumably well-off consumers part with their high-end wages (or retained capital)

to eat food much more labor intensive than that eaten at home, but, at the same time, relieving the home-cook of un-remunerated cooking servitude (however pleasurable that may be). Obviously, many cannot partake of this trade in meaning (and shift to paid labor!) much of which is a privileging of the (labor-intensive) aesthetic, the exotic taste (constructed out its rarity), if not the fillingness, per se. This is a very different trade from the fast food restaurant, where food is procured from factory farms and restaurant employees are drastically underpaid, a political economy which is more intellectually familiar.

The value of simplicity

The taste of simplicity is arguably akin to the taste for avoidance. If that is the case, risk averse eaters want transparency, in some sense to 'see' what goes into their food. This desire is partially resolved with labeling: biographies and such that describe the routes taken from farm to table. For some, however, it is the simplicity itself that is tasty, perhaps symbolizing less opportunity along the way for adulteration and alteration. Insofar as growing food anxiety is a reaction to the excesses of agro-food industrialization, particularly in the era of e. coli, mad cow disease, and genetically-engineered food, simplicity is what helps re-build this trust, creating a major problem for value-adding (Goodman and Redclift 1991; Beardsworth and Keil 1997). Opportunistic attempts to 'naturalize' global food provision by promoting fresh fruit and vegetables (Arce and Marsden 1994) or attaching geographic indication to various agricultural products (Cook and Crang 1996; Mollard et al. 2001) only go so far when it is an attenuated chain that eaters seek.

One justification for direct marketing is thus to enable transparency, at the same time leaving more value with the producer. The exchange taking place between farm and household is barely one of commodity relations – the wage labor involved in farming and selling is often omitted from the picture – leaving a very tenuous chain of commodification. The entailed threat to retailers was clearly behind their attempt to abandon California's direct marketing law a few years ago. More often, they nurture the pretense of direct marketing through written claims and photographs of the farms they claim to purchase from (in markets where such representations count). But what happens in the household? In effect, much labor is shifted to (or stays within) the household in procuring and preparing food. The home cook is the final guarantor of simplicity and care, meanings she adds with her own labor.

The taste for organic¹¹

Excellent anecdotal evidence and a few studies show that most purchases of organic food are for its presumed health and safety benefits and/or the improved environmental outcomes associated with organic farming (Byrne et al. 1991; Goldman and Clancy 1991; Jolly 1991; Packer 1996; Hartman Group 1997). Farmers choose to produce organically for similar reasons. The desire for a certain aesthetic – or 'better taste' – is a less common association, arguably produced through the Alice Waters diaspora – chefs who trained at Chez Panisse and went on to open their own restaurants (Guthman forthcoming b).¹² So, while the taste for organic draws on all of the above senses, it is, perhaps, the heightened subjectivity (and reflexivity) that best characterizes the organic

eater: the need to relieve social anxiety by doing the right thing. When mapped onto Warde's antinomies, it means opting for health over indulgence, care over convenience, extravagance over economy (ambiguously so, to be sure), and, for reasons having to do with its recent culinary history, novelty over tradition.

These meanings, however, create some remarkable tensions in the political economy of organic production. To present a particular aesthetic, organic food must be precious and limited, i.e. contained to a 'niche' market, a characteristic that does not square well with the expansion of organic production. To satisfy the need for transparency and simplicity, or to privilege care over convenience, there is less opportunity for value-added. Profitability then becomes more dependent on what Fine and Leopold (1994) call the 'aesthetic illusion', basically an economic rent that fills the gap between use value and symbolic value – always an unstable source of profits. Yet, to privilege economy over extravagance – to bring organic food to the mass market – creates the type of competition to which movement producers rebel. It is no wonder that the organic food sector is increasingly bifurcated into two very different systems of provision: one producing lower cost and/or processed organic food for the quasi-mass market and appealing to meanings of health and safety; the other producing higher value produce in direct markets and appealing to meanings of organicism, political change, and novelty. Indeed, by evoking different sides of these antinomies (in various producers' efforts to capture value), practitioners in both systems are able to claim the moral high ground.

But the environmental concern that undergirds organic consumption suggests the antinomy – not identified by Warde – of nature and technics. The oft-cited ideal of 'farming in nature's image' has its counterpart in consumption, as if eating organic represents a similarly unmediated interaction with nature. Yet, this edible naturalism of sorts creates some formidable problems for commodification, beyond those already raised. The ambiguity of 'consuming nature' is reflected in the anti-use idiom popular in some corners of the environmental movement, where a kinder and gentler use of nature is considered an oxymoron. Beyond this arguably misanthropic fringe, food derived from a less intensive use of nature has some important ramifications in land valuation. On the one hand, agricultural land values tend to be based on 'highest and best use', capitalized, that is, on the highest value crop at the most intensified production scheme possible for a given piece of land. Any system which reduces the intensity of land use by, for instance, rotating in marginal value crops, allowing longer fallows, or reducing the likely yield potentially reduces the value of that land, particularly if there are legal mechanisms to lock in such use (e.g., conservation easements). On the other hand, the improvements that land must undergo for organic production give rise to various ground rents. Processes of certification and verification are the basis of differential rents; any price premium the producer gets in the market, which is independent of the relationship with the landowner in the first instance, creates the potential for monopoly rents, such that the producer must pay the asking price for renting the land to continue to grow a commodity to sell (see Harvey 1982 for an elaboration of different kinds of ground rent). In that way, the Marshallian economic rents associated with scarcity, reflexivity, transparency, and so forth are all potentially imputed into land values, undermining the ability to farm in a less intensive manner.

Not only is this a fine example of how the landed basis of agriculture is linked with the unique aspects of food consumption (*sensu Fine*), it further suggests how the mediation of tastes has major implications for where and how food is produced and eaten and, perhaps, metabolized and disposed. For this reason, there remains a great deal of contestation as to how the nature-technics antinomy is actually mediated within the organic sector. The same branch of the organic food sector – the organic industry – that is attempting to grow the sector through the mass market tends to pay less attention to agro-ecological concepts and is happy to re-define organic rules in a way that makes them more amenable to an industrial way of farming. For example, Horizon Dairy, a publicly traded company with operations in fifty states, having some facilities with several thousand head of cattle, has been at the forefront of efforts to eliminate restrictions on livestock confinement in the development of organic standards, suggesting in its place a “scientific basis” of evaluating animal health.¹³ It is equally telling that some organic farmers did not find the use of GMOs to be contrary to organic practice – indeed bought into the discourse of GMOs’ improving on nature – until consumers made it clear that their taste for organic precluded their inclusion (cf. Levidow 1996). Only when pollen drift became a real threat to the integrity of organic product and the organic industry realized it could monopolize the GMO-free claim in the face of current US labeling laws regarding GMOs did the industry present a more united front.

Time and time again attempts to commodify organic meanings have contributed to a material circumstance that undermines these very meanings, leaving little option for those who wish to profit from these meanings other than to remake them (or capitalize on their uniqueness). There is little wonder that Horizon Organic Dairy works so hard at emphasizing a scientific basis to animal health to replace the free-range quality that organic consumers seem to yearn for. In return, Horizon gets the benefit of a phenomenal market share. To be sure, the Horizon example shows just how inseparable is the creation and distribution of value and rent from the trade in representation and meaning.

Conclusion

Food tastes always have material consequences, not only in actual sensation and bodily reproduction, but also in the sense of the work it takes to provide food. For, food tastes are not only produced by representations and passed-on cultural meanings, but also by labor and ecological processes that transform biological material from one state to another. These processes almost universally extract labor value from some people and redistribute it to others, just as they extract metabolic value from ‘natural’ actants, be they soil, cattle, or grown plants, some of which is eventually returned in kind and some of which is permanently re-distributed, leading to degraded ecological conditions.

Reciprocally, the materiality of food production imbues food with meaning: the fast food outlet connotes convenience, just as the home-cooked meal connotes care (so the theory goes). But with so-called ethical foods, such as those that are organically grown, the political meaning is supposedly derived from the visibility of this materiality (Cook and Crang 1996; Bell and Valentine 1997). In other words, the purpose of visibility is to provide evidence that fewer and/or more equitable

exchanges of value have taken place in the provision of the commodity. If that is the case, such food does indeed present a problem for commodification to the extent that one could say the ethical, or organic commodity is an oxymoron. Alternatively, producers of such commodities can extract value in the form of rent-generating instruments – signs, labels, and so forth that the food in question represents a social good. Whether such representations fetishize or defetishize may be the fundamental tension in the politics of consumption.

The methodological question, then, is whether these exchanges of meaning and value can be made visible in a power-flattened network. While ANT methodology does not explicitly preclude considerations of power – to be sure, the concepts of translation and enrollment connote processes of persuasion, attraction, and incorporation, i.e., getting things, creatures and people to act on one's behalf – a different sense of power undergirds the commodity chain approach. This is the power to appropriate the work of others, whether nature's metabolic processes or human transformations of nature, in field, factory, restaurant, or household (see Gibson-Graham 1996). Seeing whether, where, and to what end, such appropriations are made is not only crucial to an enlivened politics of consumption, it may also provide the missing analytical links between production and consumption.

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Notes

1. Alice Waters, founder of Chez Panisse, is the uncontested inventor of "California cuisine" and first to feature organically and locally grown produce as a regular feature of menus, often described by the name of the farm from which it was purchased, along with the moniker "organic."
2. In this paper I use the term rent to connote both excess profits derived from artificial barriers as well as those derived from scarcity or consumer desire (Marshallian rents). Yet, there is little question that retention of these rents is what allows growers to farm in a less intensive manner.
3. Alternatively, the industrial *filière* tradition of heterodox economics focuses more on technological and economic interdependencies. See, for example, Storper (1997).
4. Fine makes much of contrasting this insight with that of Goodman and Redclift (1991) who, he claims, only consider the organic content at each end of the chain (i.e., the beginning as a growing plant or animal, the end as metabolized through the human body). His effort at distinguishing his own work seems highly overdrawn (see e.g., Goodman and Redclift 1994). Goodman's more recent work (1999) dismisses the ontological dualism altogether.
5. For a quick sampling, consider the following: Archeologists take taste as functional to evolution, an instrument of trial and error, which makes sense given the structure and capabilities of the human tongue, but tells little about the meaning of taste (Korsmeyer 1999). Neo-classical economists set the problem aside by relying on abstract notions of

utility, at the same time making taste and choice essentially a free realm of consumer sovereignty. In contrast, functionalist anthropologists conceptualize taste as both the manifestation and communication of cultural stability, altogether removing choice from the realm of the individual (Douglas and Isherwood 1996, original 1979). They also privilege the symbolic use values of goods over their material values, as with “food as good to think,” seriously downplaying access to food as a driving force of tastes. Historians of food seem to presume that taste evolves rather mechanically with increased availability and malleability of various food items (as in many of the essays in Flandrin and Montanari 1999, original 1996; also Lauden 2001; cf. Mennell).

6. Moreover, as Sarah Whatmore pointed out during the course of the workshop, much of human life is habitual, where meanings are not subject to reflection at all.
7. One of the reasons Korsmeyer says bodily senses are taken to be of lower order is that the object of perception is closer to the sense organ. With taste, the object is actually taken into the body, connoting sexuality and envelopment. Taste is also more pleasurable, making it prone to over-indulgence. Hence, in both senses it is fraught with gendered and racialized metaphors.
8. That said, it is arguable that Bourdieu, among others, over-states the intentional affect of conspicuous consumption (à la Veblen). Warde’s *Eating Out* (2000) provides some important empirical evidence countering the notion of eating as conscious display.
9. It is striking that each of these anxieties map onto particular spatial scales: the body, the household, the ‘community’, the classed society, the ‘global environment’.
10. To fully flesh out this methodology, I would extend the entire chain in both ways to consider, for example, the economy and ecology of the TV dinner trash.
11. Much of the data in this section on organic production, including the views of growers, is drawn from the author’s dissertation research which took place in 1997 and 1998 (Guthman 2000). The study included over 150 semi-structured interviews with both all-organic and mixed (i.e., both conventional and organic) growers in several regions of California, as well as interviews with organic industry advocates and regulators, and attendance at several industry conferences.
12. The claim that organic food simply tastes better must be treated with skepticism. Blind tests of processed foods held by The San Francisco Chronicle food staff, which often include one or two organic samples, show no pattern, although processed foods are so obviously influenced by the recipe. Still, in one study they compared store bought and farmers market fresh produce (both organic and conventional), and still did not detect a difference (Duggan 2001). One could argue that such a test includes too many variables (e.g., varietal, “freshness”, soil content, and so forth), but the point cannot be lost that “organic” does not have its own taste. Cognition has to play a major role, as do all the characteristics that have been coupled with organic food such as unusual varieties and freshness. No doubt the haute chefs who swear by organics are banking on these cognitive and exotic elements.
13. Representatives of Horizon Dairy have been adamant on this point at industry conferences.

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