Laura Nistor

The Puzzles of Local Food Consumption

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Empirical Insights regarding Profiles, Motivations, and Discourses

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Introduction

This book summarizes the results of my postdoctoral research[1] in the field of sustainable consumption. The aim of the project was to reveal several aspects of Romanians' food consumption, mostly in terms of their adherence to sustainable forms of food consumption such as local food. For this purpose, literature reviews, secondary analyses on existing data, and empirical investigations were realized, whose outcome is presented in the following pages.

The book comprises three chapters. The first chapter contains a synthesis about several theoretical aspects of food consumption in general and presents the case of the so-called alternative food consumption forms (e.g. slow food, local food, organic food, etc.). These forms of consumptions are theorized in the contexts of the risk society at the crossroads of egoistic (e.g. health concern) and social-altruistic values (e.g. environmentalism and broader moral concerns referring to the ethics of consumption).

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In what concerns local food – the major subject of the analysis –, it is considered in terms of a twofold practice. It is assumed that local food has both macro- and micro-level values: on the macro-level, local food is promoted for environmental reasons since consuming locally reduces the quantity of non-renewable energy used in food transport. Local food also means a political project whose aim is to construct local economies by giving communities the right to establish their own food supply systems; food system localization creates direct relationships between producers and consumers. On the micro-level, i.e. on consumers' side, local products have a number of benefits which are usually centred around the issue of health and trust: knowledge of the origins of food, fresher and authentic products, re-personalization of commercial relations, etc.

Unfortunately, previous research in connection with Romanians' alternative food consumption is not very rich; so that in order to provide a quantitative insight, I had to rely on such data that approach this subject rather indirectly. The second chapter summarizes the results of a secondary analysis based on Eurobarometer data which investigated Romanians' food choices in terms of their preference for several extrinsic and intrinsic product cues. The conclusion of this analysis is that Romanians' food preferences are double-rooted and fit a quality vs. price model. Once the socio-demographic determinants of these two preferences have been thoroughly investigated, I was able to confirm the role of Bourdieu's distinction regarding the influence of social class on these preferences. In Romania, similarly to Europe, price preferences

are entrenched in the respondents' precarious socio-economic status, while the preference for quality seems to be a habitus specific for higher social status. As far as local as well as other alternative food products are considered to have price premiums compared to conventional products, there remains the question whether adherence to local food goes together with a dominant social status. The synthesis made in connection with previous Romanian studies suggests that this is not necessarily the case because local as well as organic products represent multidimensional constructs and preference for them can be rooted in much diverse motivations than consumers' socio-demographic background.

The results of the empirical investigations – presented in the third chapter –, which consisted in a qualitative study based on focus-group discussions among Romanian urbanites, have also confirmed this fact: local food has a diverse meaning and local-food related practices are various. The major theme of the focus-group discussions on local food included the definition of the local food, the characterization of local food in terms of strengths and weaknesses and consumers' motivations in local food consumption. Consumers are defining local food at the crossroads of a geographic and a tradition-centred narrative. Local food means a specific location, but also specific, traditional production methods and traditional ingredients. The major benefits of local food are mostly intrinsic cues like healthy and natural ingredients and sensory appeal, while social and environmental benefits are much rarely mentioned and seem that they do not make the core of the meaning regarding local food. On the other hand,

consumers' sceptical attitudes towards local food can be explained mostly on the basis of extrinsic product cues like unappealing packaging, high price, and problematic availability.

In terms of product involvement, several consumer segments have been identified with various levels of product attachments and corresponding motivations. While unconcerned consumers are price-conscious shoppers for whom the price premiums of local food are unaffordable, 'discourse-based critical' consumers who correspond to the so-called yuppie category develop critical narratives about local foods, and due to lack of time, availability, and scepticism in terms of product safety this group does not develop an enduring attachment to local food. Tasters split into two categories, both having situational involvement with local food, but while sceptical tasters remained disappointed following an encounter with local food – and thus there is little chance to re-attach them to local foods – enthusiastic tasters are faithful visitors of farmers' markets who – if obstacles like price, availability, etc. are eliminated – can develop and enduring involvement with local food products. Those for whom local food is a central issue of food choice split also into two categories: for the so-called 'by-default' consumer, local food is a matter of habitual self-supply and does not constitute a reflexive decision. On the other hand, the engaged consumers' adherence to the practice of local eating can be explained on the basis of their value shift in terms of downshifting and post-materialism or on the basis of healthism.

All in all, it seems that for the researched consumers involvement with local food occurs along the intrinsic characteristics of food (taste, ingredients); local food consumption seems to be much more motivated by health concerns and status assignment than by ethical and ecological reasons. Obviously, we need further research in order to better elaborate on the practice and corresponding motivations of local food consumption in Romania; the present analysis and its conclusions can serve as starting points for working hypotheses of future qualitative or quantitative research.

Chapter 1
Food Consumption as a Specific Form of Consumption

Consumption: the many approaches of a taken-for-granted phenomenon

Consumption is studied by many disciplines, e.g. sociology, economy, marketing, etc., and all these approaches agree that consumption has changed a lot during the recent centuries and decades. From the act of incorporation and exhaustion of goods, consumption has turned to be a very complex social phenomenon through which not only basic necessities are satisfied, but also social status is enhanced and communicated. As such, nowadays the phenomenon of consumption can be researched in very different ways, giving rise to complex theories and ideologies. Following Gabriel and Lang (2003), five major approaches of consumption can be mentioned: 1) *consumerism as a moral doctrine* – according to which consumerism is the essence of the good life and the vehicle for freedom, power, and happiness; 2) *consumerism as the ideology of conspicuous consumption* puts the accent on those aspects of

consumption through which social status is defined and enhanced; 3) *consumerism as an economic ideology* refers to the fact that consumption is the source of economic well-being, so that nurturing the need of consumption is the key to economic development; 4) *consumerism as a political ideology* refers to the politicization of consumption both in terms that the state guarantees consumer rights and in terms that the state is a major provider of goods, services and quality-related standards; 5) *consumerism as a social movement* refers to consumer advocacy, not only in the form of quality-related concerns but also in the form of criticizing overconsumption in a world of finite resources.

Schaefer and Crane (2005) have proposed a similar, rather simpler conceptualization of consumption: *consumption as hedonism; consumption as identity construction and consumption as communication*. According to the authors, when consumption is associated with a hedonistic approach, it follows that consumption constitutes a self-indulgence. Consumption can provide pleasure either through the act of consumption itself or through the usage and possession of the bought products and services (cf. Bourdeiu, 1984; Bauman, 1992). In these approaches, shopping and consumption can be viewed as mood repairing and self-management activities. Consumption as identity construction is closely related to the former approach and presupposes that people attach specific meanings to the consumed objects and services and are making use of them for the construction of their identity and self-image. The consumption as communication approach is also connected to the previous approaches as far as it

presupposes that consumption takes place in a social context: shopping, eating, etc. are activities which are usually done in the presence of others. Through the processes of interaction, people are communicating the meanings of their objects, their status, taste, etc. to others.

Even a simple look at these above mentioned approaches of consumption drives us to the conclusion that consumption is both a micro- and a macro-level activity, both an individual act and social practice approachable through broader ideologies: by consuming certain objects and services, people adhere to and express different worldviews and moralities, acquire and maintain a social status through which they include and/or exclude themselves from certain consumer groups and, by consumption, people can provide good mood or happiness for themselves, or they can manage their identity and self-presentation in accordance with specific goals and reference groups.

Food consumption: nutrition, social practice, and risks

Among the consumption of different objects and services, the consumption of food is particularly interesting. At a first glance, food has a basic role in nutrition, in human reproduction, and in physical and cognitive development (Morgan, 2010). However, food is much more than the instrument of nutrition; as a specific form of consumption, food and eating have an important role in identity construction both on

individual and social level. Thus, food consumption – similarly to consumption in general – can be viewed as *a cultural strategy* through which people are able to make visible and communicate the social and cultural differences between them (Dolan, 2002) and to adhere to certain values and ideologies. Food consumption links the satisfaction of basic human needs like nutrition, staying alive, and maintaining health with the expression of identities (Halkier, 2004) and, in this way, food consumption has a number of non-material objectives as well, which imply ethical, social, political, etc. concerns (Cohen and Murphy, 2001). As a complex phenomenon, food consumption is very much embedded in a social context (e.g. Wilska, 2002), so that individual food consumers are not the autonomous architects of their own actions but carriers of social practices, i.e. they are practitioners who – frequently routinely – develop actions in accordance with shared understandings and subjective interpretations.

The complexity of food consumption is well assessed by those four approaches of food which are presented by Lien (2004). According to the author: 1) the *Foucauldian governmentality approach* sees food as a mediator between the state and individuals, in the sense that regulations, standards, etc. shape very much our diet; food constitutes an institutionalized matter which is integrated in production chains, scientific communities, marketing, and it implies public regulations (cf. Halkier, 2010); 2) *the reflexivity approach of the risk society* contends that food is inseparable from the concept of trust; food-related trust emerges here as an abstract construct which

involves distant social relations (e.g. between global producers and local consumers); 3) *food and eating as sensory dimensions* imply that eating is much more than food intake; eating is a pleasure-seeking activity full of memories, sensory appeals, etc.; 4) *food as nature* implies the ideology and practice of environmentalism which have changed the ways we think about food in relation to production (e.g. organic farming), food products themselves (e.g. processed food vs. natural food), and in the way we think food can shape our body (e.g. diets).

Food as a social practice has changed very much during the centuries. It is well-known that in traditional societies people succeeded to anchor themselves through the practice of eating. In traditional societies, the act of eating took place within the geographical conditions of a certain location (i.e. the availability of certain plants and animals provided a more or less table menu for people), and there resulted particular 'foodways' (what, when, how to eat) which bounded the local community together (Bildtgard, 2008; see also the famous anthropological approaches of Levi-Strauss, 1969; Douglas, 1991). Later, nations and communities continued to define themselves through cultures of eating – a practice which continues to be visible even nowadays and which became part of the gastronomic cultures in the form of specific cuisines (e.g. Italian, Mexican, etc.). On a smaller scale, foodways are visible today on the level of communities which try to define and enhance themselves through specific traditional food products which are promoted in the form of eating and cooking festivals centred around specific national or communitarian foods.

Besides the above mentioned smaller-scale tendencies, what becomes interesting during the course of modernity is *the standardization of food production* (e.g. through technologies that produced food and through retailer networks which made possible the globalization of food), which leads to the de-localization of food and to the loosing of the place–food connection of the traditional society. In the era of modernity, eating became a more individualized consumer choice which is not so dependent on consumers' local communities whether we are talking about the geographic or the social community. The modern food system implies a separation between the geographic place of food production, on the one hand, and the geographic place of food consumption, on the other hand; these two segments are connected through retailer chains (Wilska, 2002). Consequently, modern food consumption can be considered a globalized food system defined by standardized products, huge distances (i.e. food miles), and retailer chains.

Obviously, food processing has a number of benefits such as improved preservation, increased distribution potential, convenience, availability of products throughout seasons and regions, etc., but procession has also a number of shortcomings and harms such as reduced nutritional value, negative health effects, pollution associated with the energy of processing and transportation, etc. (Kaplan, 2012). Having in mind these negative aspects of the modern food system, Rozin (1976 – qtd by Bildtgard, 2008: 101) contends that in the era of late modernity we can speak about a "double nature of eating", i.e. the food is both a biological necessity and a risk. In strong connection with this latter issue, nowadays, food consumption

is increasingly viewed as an "anxiety-ridden activity" (Bildtgard, 2008: 101) due to those hazards and insecurities which are implicit in food production and consumption. Tulloch and Lupton (2002 – qtd by Connolly and Prothero, 2008: 134) go even further and contend that in the course of late modernity the everyday presence of risk has nowhere been more evident than in relation to the consumption of food products.

The risks which are implicit in modern food accentuate the problem of food-related trust, which can be viewed on different levels. Bildtgard (2008) offers in this sense a very comprehensive review which describes three major types of food-related trust: *emotional*, *habitual*, and *reflexive trust*. These types of trust resume very well our relation to food during the course of traditional, modern, and post-modern society.

Emotional trust is inherent in the social networks around food and cooking. E.g., the trust in our friends' or parents' cooking illustrates such form of trust: we believe that the emotional bond between us can be regarded as a guarantee for the safeness of the food they cook. Similarly, the act of food sharing can be regarded a form of emotional trust.

Habitual trust in food is based on the repetitive nature of events occurring in the world and can be conceptualized based on Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus. Habitual trust can be located on the level of community in the form of food-communities, which share common ways of thinking about food and eating. The author uses the word "alimentalities" (Bildtgard, 2008: 107) when he defines communities' common ways of thinking about food and the act of eating. The most

classical examples of alimentalities are traditional ethnic or religious communities, or even nations for whom food is frequently an identity-building process. However, in contemporary societies, alimentalities are less defined by place and much more by those typical food choices that certain individuals adopt no matter where they live (e.g. fast-food consumers, organic consumers, etc.). Another form of habitual trust is implicit in the so-called rational organization of food production and, in fact, is implicit in the social role of food producers, whether we are talking about a chef or an organization or a community which produces the food. This is a kind of instrumental trust, since "we expect organizations such as retailers, food-processing industries and national food-control agencies to behave rationally, efficiently and in a continuous fashion" (Bildtgard, 2008: 111). In this sense, the ever-similar way of fast-food products can illustrate such kind of instrumental trust (cf. Ritzer, 2000). A different type of habitual trust can be defined as policy-generated trust and refers both to food-related regulation and policies and to social justice implicit in food-exchange, whether we talk about the grocer or about larger-scale initiatives centred around food justice like fair trade.

A third major type of trust in relation to food is called reflexive trust and it is implicit in the idea of reflexive modernization. It refers to situations when we need to decide, reflexively, whether to trust or not to trust. Bildtgard (2008: 118) defines two major situations in this regard: the first one is "when some kind of problem arises in the food selection process, and routine fails to solve the problem, such as when

food that we used to trust is no longer manufactured or if some day it goes bad" and the second is "when we encounter a new discourse that problematizes our food habits, such as when the public learnt about the existence of mad-cow disease and the risk of transferral through beef consumption, or if a person one day encounters moral arguments for vegetarianism that challenge his/her moral position and, in turn, food habits".

In the approaches of food through the lenses of risk, besides the issue of safety, an important assumption is that during the course of modernity and late-modernity individuals are 'left alone' and they have to choose between different lifestyles and identities all by themselves. In the absence of anchoring (whether to a certain geographic place or a certain social community), individuals' choices imply in a great manner the risk of failure (i.e. the choice of non-adequate food whether we take the issue of adequacy from the perspective of individual health or social or environmental concern, e.g. the choice of food which is 'too global', so that it implies greater food miles and results in considerable pollution). In this context of being alone, the risk society brings with itself a major need to rely on secondary agencies and institutions – like the market or the mass media – when making the food choice (Bauman, 1992; Wilska, 2002). Another form to reduce food-related anxiety is the need to belong to social groups which provide consumers with certain ways of conduct. In the era of postmodernism, such groups are called 'neo-tribes' and appear in the form of different lifestyle groups which propagate several forms of alternative consumption.

Such consumption collectives can be perceived as identity movements which manifest themselves through certain values, ways of consumption, and even visible objects like clothing, and thus neo-tribes are a form of visible consumption (Bauman, 1992).

The risks which began to rise in connection with modern food raise a number of questions about what we eat (Bildtgard, 2008), and this issue determines consumers to re-verify their relation with food and to generate reflexive 'life-politics' in relation with food consumption (Connolly and Prothero, 2008). Individuals start to reflect upon consumer "practices, preferences and even the process of reflection itself" (Adams and Raisborough, 2008: 1168) and, in terms of practices, start to adopt alternative ways of food consumption compared to the conventional models of eating based on industrial production and retailer chains.

The rise of the alternative food consumption movement

The alternative forms of food consumption comprise those forms of food consumption which are different from the classical, homogenous, retail-chain-based products. Alternative ways of food consumption can take different forms and are usually motivated by ethical, environmental values (e.g. environmental protection, fair treatment of the animals and workers involved in the production of food products, preference for local products) and health protection concerns

(e.g. several forms of diets, weight control, functional foods, organic foods, etc.). Thus, there is a common assumption that alternative forms of consumption are *purchasing decisions which go beyond economic considerations*. As Micheletti (2003) contends, when people buy something, they may consider – besides the costs of the products – several other aspects: e.g. where they want to buy the product, where and how the product is made, whether it includes harmful chemicals, who are the people behind the product, etc. When a person gives attention to these aspects as well, he/she enacts as a conscious, reflexive consumer.

The majority of the authors agree that alternative consumption has a double source. E.g. according to Miller (1995 – qtd by Connolly and Prothero, 2008: 135), alternative food choices are either motivated "by fear of consequences for the consumer's body" or by more general concerns regarding the environment in general. However, other authors are more careful about the motivations of alternative food consumption and see the various forms of reflexive consumption in more individualistic terms. For instance, Szasz (2007) considers that turning towards alternative ways of consumption, e.g. the consumption of organic food, can be perceived in terms of individual safety. By choosing to consume such products, consumers try to protect themselves from real or imagined risks.

Obviously, to be alternative in food consumption means to go against the mainstream, which in our case is represented by the industrialized, globalized food production. As Morgan (2010) considers, today's food consumption can be classified

around two major practices and associated narratives: 1) *the conventional agrifood narrative* which is centred around intensive agricultural production, large food miles, and retailer chains and 2) *the alternative agrifood narrative* which includes a wide array of products and consumption practices such as ethical, organic, local, fair trade, etc. This latter narrative structures the so-called 'ethical foodscape' which is associated with ecological integrity and social justice, and it practically becomes synonymous with the so-called 'sustainable agrifood system'. Inside the so-called ethical foodscape, one can find further narratives and practices, e.g. the so-called green and local food narratives, the organic and fair trade narratives, etc.

It can be deduced from the above consideration that alternative food consumption, i.e. the alternative agrifood narrative is an umbrella term for various practices which are centred around a range of ethical considerations in connection with the environment, other people, etc. and whose aim is to secure the long-term sustainability of the environmental quality, the fairness of working conditions and the correct payment for producers. In Morgan's view, the many forms of alternative food consumption are more or less synonymous with each other, as far as they all intend to induce – one way or another – sustainability and fairness in food production, merchandise, and consumption.

There are, however, authors (e.g. Freestone and McGoldrick, 2008) who are more careful when utilizing synonyms. They think that while the concept of ethical consumerism has indeed born out of the environmental

movement and green consumption, it is important to distinguish between green consumerism and ethical consumerism because ethical consumerism includes a broader range of issues than green consumption. Thus, while green consumers are concerned with the health of the planet, ethical consumers are additionally concerned with the people, they aim at buying products which do not harm either the environment or the society. Thus, the alternative agrifood narrative and practice can be separated into two major streams: the broader ethical consumption and the narrower green consumption. In my opinion, as we will see in the followings as well, the specific sub-practices of each of the two forms of alternative food consumption are all including issues of environmental and human concern, so that practically we can consider green consumption as a specific form of ethical consumption.

Indeed, alternative food consumption initiatives can have different names, in accordance with the main goal of them. They can be referred to as ethical consumption (e.g. Shaw and Shiu, 2003), sustainable consumption (e.g. Southerton et al., 2004; Seyfang, 2006), critical consumerism (e.g. Sassatelli, 2006), etc., but all of these initiatives have as a common ground the reflexivity of the consumers, so that they can be called *forms of conscious consumption* (Willis and Schor, 2012) and cover those forms of consumption which are motivated by values concerning environmental and social sustainability; conscious consumption choices might take different forms: no-consumption, reducing consumption, or choosing products in

accordance with the above mentioned values, e.g. organic, environmental, local, etc. products.

Based on these above consideration, in the followings, I will use interchangeably the terms of alternative, conscious, and ethical consumption; even more, I will make use of another umbrella term as well, that of *sustainable consumption*.

Ethical consumption in terms of food is usually focused on the so-called 'niche products' (Johnston et al., 2011) such as organic products, fair trade products, local products, etc. All these products imply the better livelihood of the people who produce and consume these products and also the healthiness of the environment. Thus, ethical/conscious consumption implies the social responsibility for other people, us, and the planet (cf. Dolan, 2002). In this line of thought, it is legitimate to consider ethical food consumption initiatives as a form of sustainable consumption.

In order to understand the broader essence of sustainable consumption, one has to consider that sustainability can be defined in two forms, narrowly and more broadly. In the narrow sense, sustainability refers to environmental conditions and maintaining the quality of the environment. In a broader sense, sustainability is about balancing economic, ecological and social goals and consequences inside the process of consumption (Schaefer and Crane, 2005). In this latter sense, sustainable consumption provides the critique of the consumerist lifestyles defined by hyper-consumption and propagates a more reflexive, more conscious, less harmful, and more frugal consumption.

Alternative food consumption: some critical assumptions

Alternative forms of food consumption are frequently put under critical lenses. There are authors (e.g. Devinney et al., 2010) who consider that ethical consumerism is nothing more than a myth because the concept itself is too broadly defined, to loosely operationalized, and too moralistic in its stance. Consequently, the authors suggest that it would be more correct to speak about *consumer social responsibility* instead of ethical consumption. In their opinion, consumer social responsibility denotes a conscious and deliberate choice of products based on personal and moral beliefs which can be expressed in three ways: 1) as an activity with respect to specific causes, e.g. donations or dispositions to be involved in protests and boycotts; 2) as an opinion in surveys in the form of product preferences; 3) as an activity in terms of purchasing and non-purchasing behaviour.

The critical approaches of sustainable consumption criticize also the individualistic approach of these consumption movements. The authors consider that the sustainable and other alternative consumption paradigms are very similar to the so-called aggregationist paradigm (Willis and Schor, 2012) of consumerism which assumes that consumers are "philosophically consistent actors who hold overarching ideologies and continually connect the dots between these abstract values and a wide variety of specific consumption behaviors" (Holt, 2012: 239). However, empirical studies tend

to show a rather incongruent behaviour between values and overt actions; people usually do not convert their ethical values to congruent practices for several reasons.

Similarly, Evans et al. (2012) consider that theories of alternative consumption tend to frame the problem as a sovereign consumer behaviour; the reductionist approaches assume that alternative consumption occurs by influencing consumer choices and persuading individuals to behave in a less environmentally damaging way. Willis and Schor (2012) contend also that in the case of the alternative consumption forms we can speak about a kind of folk model, that is about a 'naïve aggregationist' model which puts the accent on the consumers as drivers of social change. According to this model, the small actions of many individuals, added together, can change the world. The authors (i.e. Evans et al., 2012) propose the re-conceptualization of the alternative ways of consumption in the form of a social practice and consider that the patterns of sustainable consumption are embedded in a wider social ordering of practices. For them, consumption is a habit, a routine, it has an everyday dynamic, it implies social relations, material culture, socio-technical systems, cultural conventions, and shared understandings. A real sustainable consumption implies a set of puzzles, both from the macro- and the micro-level; sustainable consumption is not a purely individual act, it presupposes a specific food system and political initiatives from the production through the storage, consumption, and food-surplus management. Consequently, when talking about the necessity of change in food-related practices, we must acknowledge that change can happen 1) as

a bottom-up movement by consumer groups, 2) from the top down e.g. when governments formulate regulations and legislations, and 3) from the intermediate market level when large companies decide to market ethical products (Tischner and Kjaernes, 2010).

Alternative consumption practices are frequently viewed with scepticism: Gabriel and Lang (1995) think that as far as sustainable consumption builds also on commoditized exchanges between producers and consumers such alternative networks remain within the logic of the market and there remains lesser space for real social solidarity; Buttel (2003) considers that green consumption in the form of consuming less is ineffective; Macnaghten (2003) notes that green consumption is too individualistic in its scope than current narratives claim and consumers are choosing certain products motivated by their health and well-being rather than by the well-being of the planet, so that alternative consumption can be conceptualized as a rather selfish consumption, even if it generates several side-effects which are positive for the environment as well; Beagan et al. (2010) consider that labelling alternative consumption with ethical denominations creates further problems as far as normative approaches assume that people who support conventional agriculture, market capitalism, and convenience foods are behaving less responsibly, etc. Thus, the opinion of Sassatelli (2006) is perfectly acceptable, who contends that each term which is used to describe recent trends in food consumption has limitations since they imply that other ways of eating are not ethical, moral, or politically correct.

Other authors put the accent on consumers' ambivalence in respect of purchasing decisions, which, added to routine, further complicates the case of ethical, sustainable, etc. consumption. Barnett et al. (2005), for instance, consider that ethical consumption has its roots both in the so-called moral philosophies that privilege the right and in those ideologies which privilege the good. While the former refer to what people ought to do in responding to ethical imperatives, the latter refer to the properties and outcomes that our actions should bring about, and thus are consequentialist morals. However, the authors contend that both approaches are open towards criticism since they are presenting models of ethical conduct that are very strict in their demands: both are presenting models of ethical conduct that are abstract, inflexible, and which do not take into account the complexities and ambivalences of everyday decision-making in the case of purchasing decisions. Ethical consumers are frequently ambivalent and make paradox choices: "some of the most environmentally conscious consumers also desire organic fresh fruit and vegetables year-around, which, when combined with vastly improved global logistics and transportation, has led to an immensely unsustainable agricultural practice" (Holt, 2012: 243).

Clarke et al. (2008) are concerned with several short-comings which are implicit in local food consumption. Firstly, they assume that there is the risk that local food regimes are not necessarily just regimes in terms of labour and environment relations and they are not equally available to all social groups of consumers. Thus, local food produces

marginalization both on producers' and on consumers' side. Secondly, the ethical values of local food systems may be internally contradictory, i.e. emphasis on localism often privileges ecological sustainability over social justice. Thirdly, the political and ethical branding of local foods may be subjected to a process of mainstreaming in the sense that the quality of these products is increasingly associated with their premium prices, so that organic agriculture is used to generate excess profit.

Lockie (2009) does not see alternative food networks as being in harsh contradiction with traditional food networks based on the commodification of food. As he notes, the whole development of these alternative models can be conceptualized as a by-product of the conventional food system, a reaction to the latter's imperfection. Thus, the rapid growth of organic food products can be much more explained by the strong consumer demand stimulated by a lack of trust in conventional food products than by the mass-marketing techniques like advertising (Lockie, 2009). A great number of food-related risks and scandals (e.g. genetic manipulation, cloning, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, dioxin, etc.), which were implicit in the conventional food system, have raised the issue of trusting food and caused anxiety about food choices (Bildtgard, 2008). Such events generated both top-down and bottom-up initiatives. The former consist in the introduction of stricter national- and/or international-level regulations on food security, while the latter consist in citizens' initiatives, which can be either individual (e.g. family-level decisions about consuming certain foods but not

consuming some other types of food) or collective (e.g. boycotting certain products, brands, etc. or mass participation in alternative food networks, e.g. fair trade, organic, local products, etc.).

The citizenship of alternative consumption

As already mentioned in the previous chapters, food is much more than the instrument of nutrition and it is even more than identity expression (Halkier, 2001). In fact, in contemporary societies, food and food choices work as forms of political protest and buying can be considered a political act (Sassatelli and Davolio, 2010). Through buying or avoiding certain food products, citizen-consumers can be mobilized to address social and/or ecological injustices (Beagan et al., 2010, see also Johnston, 2008). As a result, adherents to various forms of alternative food consumption, whether we refer to green, ethical, local, organic, etc. consumption, can be viewed as adherents to a broader social movement which challenges the unsustainable and the unfair nature of global food production. Food citizens are also members of an imagined community of ideas and practices (Shaw, 2007) or they form 'neo-tribes' (Bauman, 1992), and no matter that members of such communities are situated far away from one another as they are linked together by the values and practices they share in connection with food consumption.

As such, alternative forms of food consumption, like the more general green consumption or the more specific forms

Chapter 2
Previous Insights into Romanians' Food-Related Preferences

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, consumers are not uniformly devoted to the issue of food quality and there are several cleavages which circumscribe specific consumer segments. In the context of Europe, empirical evidence shows that consumers in northern and western states are more devoted to the various forms of conscious consumption than those living in the southern and eastern countries (e.g. Thogersen, 2010).[1] On the micro-level, studies indicate the existence of further cleavages according to several individual-level variables; the leading role in this respect is played by the social status. The higher prices of better-quality food products mean that quality-aware purchases may be too great a burden

[1] The reason for this cleavage might be both the better information of the consumers in these states (e.g. Halkier et al., 2007) and the better macro-economic climate, as well as micro-economic status, in which context spending more on better-quality products appears as a low-cost situation for the consumers (Koos, 2012).

for low-income people and their access to this alternative lifestyle may be limited (e.g. Steenkamp, 1997; Harrison et al., 2007). Bourdieu's (1984) classic thesis about the role of social status in shaping particular food-related habitus is thus still relevant and, despite the globalization and standardization of food products, consumers are still divided into specific categories with particular food-related preferences.

The purpose of this chapter is to present some previous insights concerning Romanians' food-related preferences. The question is how, in an economically less favourable context, the public develops specific attitudes and preferences towards food and how specific individual-level variables influence these preferences. Unfortunately, the number of studies which have previously examined Romanians' food, and especially local food-related preferences, is very limited, so that we must rely upon a few analyses. Somewhat more numerous are those studies which aimed at studying the public's perception regarding organic food products, but even in these cases the investigations took the form of marketing surveys or that of analyses in connection with labelling and certification process (Petrescu and Petrescu-Mag, 2015), while the more complex background of such attitudes remained unexplored. With these limitations in mind, in the following sections, some conclusions of these studies are going to be presented and the results of a previous personal investigation[2] in connection with the role of the price–quality tandem in structuring Romanians' food-related choices are outlined.

[2] Nistor, L. (2014). Between price and quality. The criteria of food choice in Romania. *Czech Sociological Review*, 50 (3): 391–418.

Food in Romania: a heavy burden

Statistical data from the National Institute of Statistics (NIS, 2012) reveal that food consumption constitutes a heavy burden for Romanian households. In the total population, household expenditures on food and non-alcoholic beverages accounted for as much as 44% of total (household) consumption expenditures. This is one of the highest percentages in Europe and reveals much more about real income constraints than food prices do, which in Romania are among the lowest in Europe (Eurostat, 2013).

Determining exactly how much Romanians spend/are able to spend on food is, of course, complicated by differences between social classes. For instance, farmer households spend as much as 59% of household income on food, while employees spend a little less than the national average (41%). When considering these discrepancies, it is also necessary to take into account the ratio between the monetary expenditures on food and the equivalent value of food products that households obtain from their own resources (i.e. from agriculture). In the case of farmer households, 44% of the total of food-related expenditure is covered by self-supplied food,[3] while in the case of employees self-supplied food amounts only to 8%. These differences have been well outlined by Alexandri and Alboiu (2009: 152), who contend that:

[3] Self-supplied food in Romania refers to vegetables and meat products which are produced in households' private farms. Such products usually do not enter the market but are used for the personal necessities of the households.

> Romania, as a result of the high share of its rural population (45 per cent of the total population), is characterized by a mixed food consumption pattern. Thus, there the urban population has a consumption pattern in which access to food is mainly restricted by household purchasing power, and a consumption pattern of the rural population that includes the families that own land, whose food situation depends both upon their own production and their purchasing power. These consumption patterns do not exist in a pure state, as even the urban population has a significant degree of self-consumption, coming from the transfers of products from their relatives who live in the rural area.

These remarks concerning the double source of food products can be sustained by the data of the Mednet Marketing Research Center (Vaschi, 2011) which investigated the food purchase behaviours of Romanians living in large cities. The results of the survey showed that 66% of those questioned declared they are consuming organic products which they either purchase from the market (70%) or receive from relatives living in the countryside (53%); a smaller percent (16%) of the urbanites grow these products in their gardens.

The studies which investigated Romanians' perceptions about alternative foods, especially organic foods, have all showed that alternative food consumption is perceived as a costly option, even if after all it pays off, especially due to positive health-related outcomes. For instance, as the same Mednet survey (e.g. Vaschi, 2011) shows, the large majority of the respondents (85%) think that organic products are more expensive than conventional products, but nearly the same is the percent of those (81%) who consider organic products to be healthier compared to conventional products; thus, it is not

surprising that there are more people (46%) who consider that the quality–price ratio of the organic products is better than that of the conventional products' (29%).

The data from 2014 of the Special Eurobarometer 416 (European Commission 2014) showed that in Romania 32% of the public declared that in the previous month of the survey they had chosen local products, which is close to the European average (37%). A short investigation of this purchase option in accordance with status variables suggests that it is a choice specific for a more elite background, i.e. for highly educated,[4] higher-status[5] people, mostly females (35% vs. 29% in the case of males), and from older age-groups.[6] Moreover, the choice of local food products is more common in rural areas (34%) and in smaller towns (37%) than in large cities (24%). Obviously, these findings indicate not only the role of the income in structuring food-related choices but also that of the food-related concerns (e.g. females and older age) and of the availability of local food (e.g. smaller localities where people usually obtain local food from their own gardens and farms); but, in any case, they are illustrative for the role of social status as well. It is important to remark that even if a higher social status can predispose to local and organic food consumption, it does not necessary imply a consistent set of motivations in

[4] 35% in the case of people having more than 19 years of education vs. 29% in the case of those having a maximum of 15 years of education.

[5] 35% in the case of high-class, 33% in the case of middle-class, and 28% in the case of low-class self-placement.

[6] 34% in the case of people from the age-groups 40–54 and 55 plus vs. 30% in the case of the 25–39 age-groups and 27% in the case of the 15–24 age-group.

terms of health-preservation and/or environmental concerns because social status can easily mean status-assignment through specific consumption choices, as it will be shown later in this chapter.

The IRES (2013) survey on a representative national sample, which has addressed Romanians' eating habits, showed that 91% of the population shared the opinion that Romanians had an unhealthy diet. At the same time, 46% of the respondents believe that richer people eat healthier than poor individuals. Moreover, according to the data collected in this survey, the consensual profile of the health-conscious Romanian consumer corresponds to a wealthy and well-educated older woman who lives in a rural area. The major impediments to people eating healthily are income, price constraints, and the unavailability of healthy products.

Interestingly, home cooking, which otherwise might be seen as an indicator of a less wealthy population who cannot afford to eat out (cf. Warde and Martens, 2000)[7] was considered by two-thirds of the respondents to be an important opportunity for healthy eating. This can certainly be true if people are attentive to the foods they choose to cook. The data indicate, however, that one-third of the respondents declared that they are inattentive to what they eat and that for the majority of them this is because they cannot financially afford to be concerned about food quality.

[7] In Romania, 89% of the respondents use to take lunch at home. 60% of those questioned cook every day and this is also the fraction of those who only rarely eat out.

When status variables are involved in food choices, they can signal conspicuous consumption as well (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). In this respect, the smaller-scale study of Petrescu and Petrescu-Mag (2015) is illustrative, which was realized in the North-Western region of Romania and which showed that 33% of the respondents perceived that organic food is a fashionable food choice, and this perception was more prevalent in the case of higher-educated respondents who in the same time tended to reject the idea that organic food has environmental benefits. Other smaller-scale studies analysing Romanians' conscious consumption behaviour in the form of preferences for organic, green, local etc. products have revealed the importance of several status variables (e.g. Lubieniechi, 2002; Stanculescu and Marin, 2008; Stancu, 2011), such as education, income, urban residence, etc., in these food choices. Such studies have also shown that two basic narratives of conscious consumption exist in Romania: the subsistence narrative, in which the preference for organic food is a matter of self-supply and another, less dominant lifestyle narrative, in which conscious consumption is a value-based reflexive choice in the context of the risk society (Titarenko et al., 2012). In the same line, the study of Gherman (2014) in connection with the social representations of the organic food showed that price is an important element in structuring the meaning of organic food, but there are other elements which are involved in the semantics and perception of organic food and which have to do with quality-related aspects: the nucleus of representations comprises elements like price, health, authenticity, and availability, while the peripheral zone of the

representations corresponds to experience, money, income, whims, supermarket, additives, and benefits. The author found also that people who identify themselves positively with health, openness to change, diet, food consciousness, informed choice, trust, and quality consume larger amounts of organic food, while those who identify themselves positively with convenience, price, suspicion, and tradition tend to consume lesser amounts of organic food. Thus, a conscious choice of organic food is much more about adopting newer dietary regimes rather than about preserving the status quo and traditional food habits; in these conscious narratives, organic food is an instrument for health preservation which requires openness to change in terms of food choice.

Between price and quality

While the price of products can act both as a cue to quality and an indicator of economic constraints that limit access to better-quality products (Ding et al., 2010), there is nonetheless a very complex relationship between price and quality, and studies aimed at revealing the nature of this relationship can provide important empirical findings and useful arguments.

Romania has less favourable macro-economic and micro-economic conditions,[8] which make the country an interesting

[8] Measured in Purchasing Power Standards (PPS) and compared to the reference value =100 PPS of the EU 27, the Romanian GDP for 2011 is 49 PPS. With this value, Romania has the second lowest GDP after Bulgaria (http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1

case on which to research food-related choices. The Romanian context allows, therefore, for an investigation into the reverse of the so-called low-cost hypothesis of food choice (Koos, 2012), that is to say, whether in an economically less well-off environment quality-conscious shopping – which, after all, can comprise the whole range of alternative food consumption – entails high costs and may be a less affordable luxury. Starting from this premise, I realized a secondary analysis on the data of the Special Eurobarometer 389 (European Commission, 2012) with the purpose to explore two major interconnected hypotheses. As the detailed results of this analysis have already been published,[9] in this subchapter, I will repeat only some of the parts and the main conclusion of this investigation. The first and more general hypothesis of this research assumed that in the specific economic situation of Romania the price of a product is not perceived as a quality cue but rather as an economic constraint, which serves as an impediment for accessing higher-priced, better-quality products. Following the classic thesis of Bourdieu's (1984) *Distinction,* the second hypothesis (which can provide further support to the former) assumed that, in spite of the generally unfavourable economic context, there are individual-level variables that can generate class differences relating to food preferences.

&language=en&pcode=tec00114 – last visit 24 January, 2013). Moreover, the data of the Romanian Statistical Institute show that 44% of the Romanian households' monthly income is spent on food and non-alcoholic beverages (NIS, 2012).

[9] Nistor (2014).

Chapter 3
Discourses about Local Food. The Results of a Qualitative Investigation among Romanian Urbanites

This last chapter of the book summarizes the main findings of those qualitative investigations which aimed at revealing Romanian consumers' discourses about local food products. The major research directions were focused on the meaning of the local food; attitudes towards such food in terms of likes and dislikes, motivations, purchasing intentions and involvements with these food products. In the following subchapters, the methodology of the research as well as the research results are going to be presented.

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the research in connection with Romanian consumers' involvement in alternative food consumption, including local food consumption, is still scarce, so these subsequent results should be interpreted in terms of explorative facts whose aim was to

circumscribe some recurrent discourses and major narratives in connection with the researched phenomenon. The research itself was constructed as an exploratory endeavour aiming at answering some specific questions rather than testing some *a priori* formulated hypotheses. Following the directives of the Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), the intention was to reveal – based on the collected discursive material – several recurrent themes and specific *habitus* in connection with consumers' attitudes and behaviours towards local food. Once revealed, such patterns can serve as departing points for further research, including the testing of hypotheses.

Research design and methodology

The comprehensive summary of Andorfer and Liebe (2011) separates between quantitative and qualitative approaches in the study of sustainable consumption. The former consist in sociological surveys aiming at discovering the main motivations, values, and attitudes of consumers towards sustainable product purchase and also have the aim of describing the sociological profile of these people. Qualitative approaches typically take the form of in-depth interviews and focus groups and investigate deeper narratives associated with sustainable consumption practices.

In my research, the quantitative investigation was used especially in the form of secondary analysis on specific surveys and data sets about Romanian consumers' food-

related attitudes and, in so far as possible, about their attitudes towards alternative food consumption. The results of such investigations have already been presented in the previous chapter and revealed mostly specific preferences in terms of general food choice rather than a specific trend in connection with local food consumption. What I succeeded to deduce as a major finding from these quantitative analyses is that there are two major determinants of food choice in Romania: intrinsic quality, on the one hand, and the extrinsic price criterion, on the other hand. Thus, in general, we can speak about the conflictual nature of food choice; in connection with local food products, we can postpone the expectation that consumers might see these products as better quality alternatives, but the higher prices of the products might hinder the purchase.

Those previous researches which revealed several tendencies in connection with Romanian consumers' attitudes towards local, traditional, or organic food and which have also been summarized in the previous chapter, albeit present important findings on local levels, still do not form a consistent research block in order to formulate broader theories on local food consumption in Romania.

The option for qualitative investigations is motivated not only by the lack of a theoretical framework in connection with Romanian consumers' local food-related attitudes, and thus by the need to explore deeper narratives and understandings, but also by the inherent nature of local food consumption. As several authors (e.g. Alkon, 2008) consider, the rise of sustainable consumption initiatives can be linked to the ideology of reconnection to local place and local people, and

this is especially visible in the case of food products as well as small scale sustainable food production and consumption. The whole internal logic of sustainable consumption, and particularly that of the local food consumption is centred on the idea of small, deep, etc. Thus, the epistemology of the qualitative investigations seems more appropriate to reveal the internal logic of local food consumption.

Inside the qualitative strategy, I opted for the method of focus-group interviews, which is a dominant research design in connection with local food consumption (Feldmann and Hamm, 2015) and in marketing in general (cf. qualitative marketing – Threlfall, 1999). Compared to the individual interviews, focus groups have the advantage of collecting the data in a more natural way, by taking into account the opinions resulted due to participants' reciprocal influencing of one another (Krueger and Casey, 2009). Focus groups are especially useful in exploring debated topics, with pro and contra arguments. In such interaction situations, the participants are more motivated to argument their own opinions, and thus the method is suitable to deeply explore the why behind the what (Morgan, 1990 – qtd by Threlfall, 1999).

The research field consisted of different urban settings: a total of ten focus-group interviews have been conducted in five Romanian urban locations (two focus groups in each location), including both large cities (Bucharest, Brașov, and Cluj-Napoca) and small towns (Miercurea Ciuc and Sfântu Gheorghe). Finally, an online focus group was conducted via Skype, having as participants seven consumers from these locations. These online participants were consumers who

identified themselves as dedicated, conscious consumers of local foods; otherwise, the participants in the ten offline focus groups represented a general public with different kinds of involvement with local food consumption. When selecting these localities, the consideration was that depending on their residential backgrounds citizens may attach different meanings to local food and may have different knowledge, motivations, and accessibility with regard to such food products.

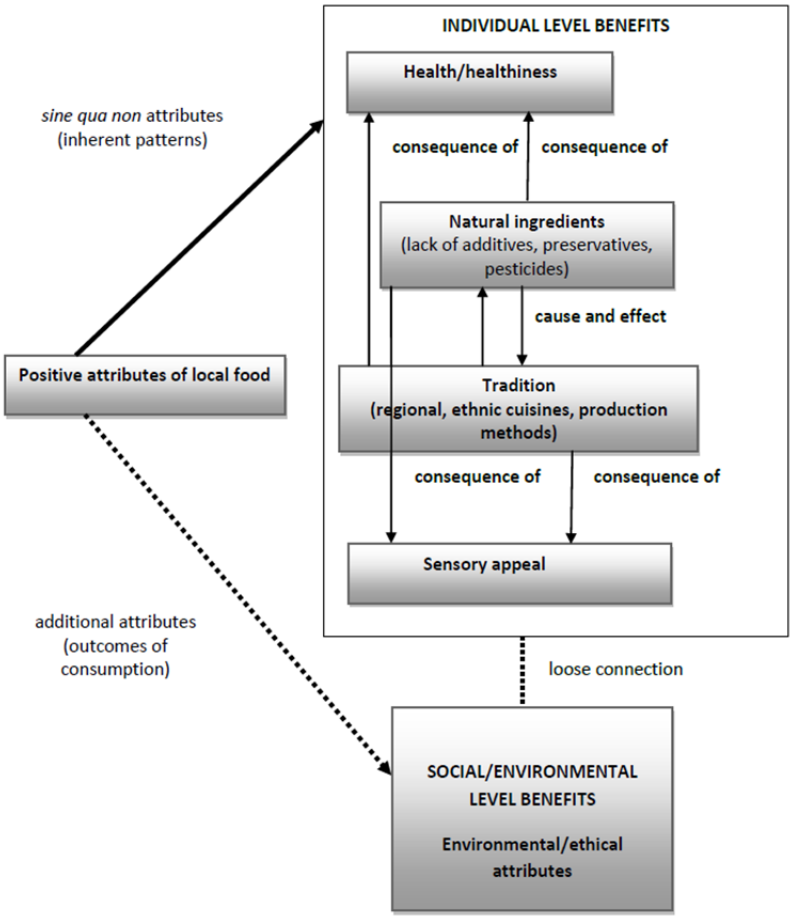
Focus groups were homogenous in terms of the participants' age and marital/family status and were heterogeneous in terms of other socio-demographical backgrounds. Thus, in each of the five localities, one out of the two focus groups consisted of young participants (20–35 years old), living alone in independent households, without children, while the other focus group comprised middle-aged and older people (36–75 years old), with family (husband, wife, child/children). Here, the assumption which was based on the special literature (e.g. Davies et al., 1995; Hughner et al., 2007; Starr, 2009) was that there could be age- and life-stage-related differences in respondents' attitudes towards local food.

Participants have been selected via Facebook messages, so that I posted a call for participation on my wall and asked my network members to share the message in the respective settlements. In this way, I succeeded to collect relatively rapidly those 6–8 people who participated in each group. Focus groups were conducted between May and July 2014. The online focus group was conducted in September 2014. The structure of the focus groups in terms of participants is presented in *Table 1*.

lack pesticides and conservatives, but are also more expensive and more difficult to be found than conventional products.

The strengths of local food

The graph below summarizes the thematic structure of the positive attributes of local food (*Graph 3*).



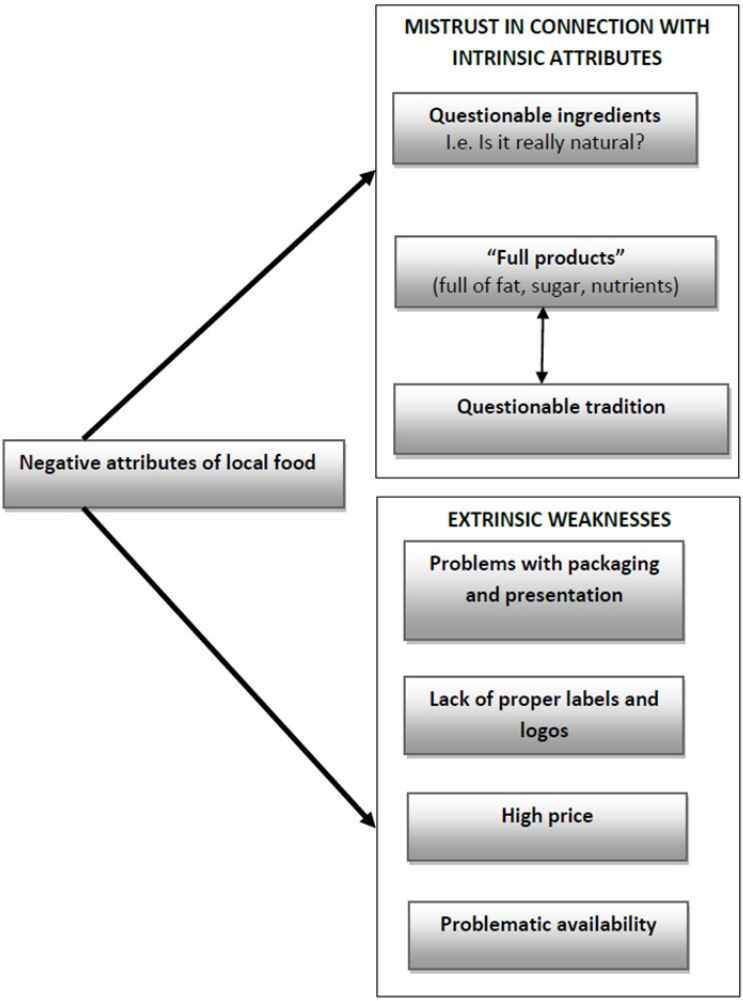
Graph 3. ***The structuring of the positive attributes of local food***

The weaknesses of the local products

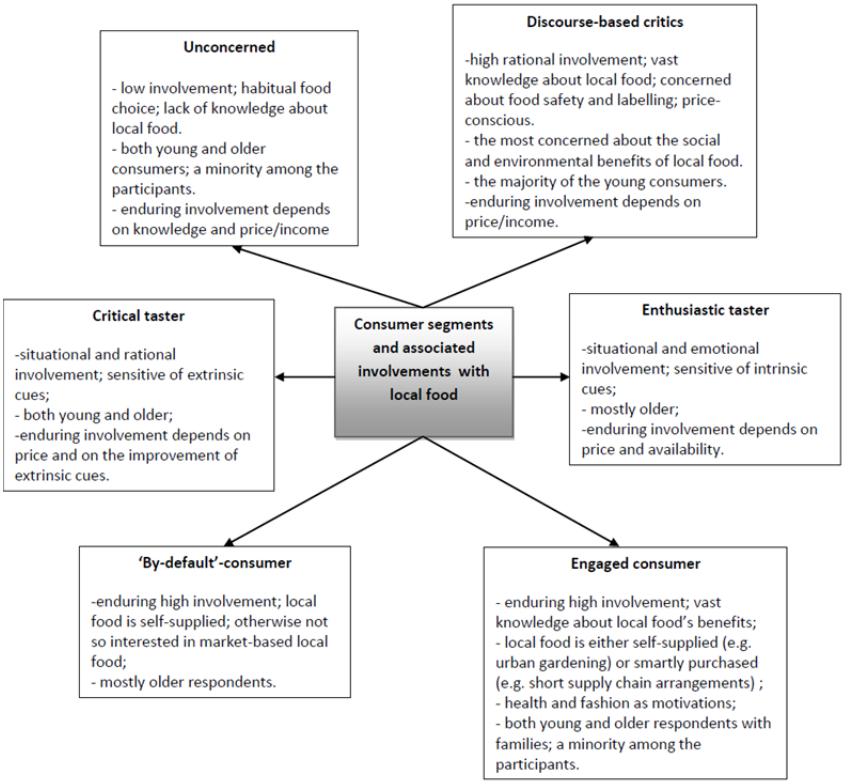
As already mentioned, the positive attributes of the local food products do not constitute the exclusive patterns of such foods and there were recorded detailed narratives about the weaknesses of such products. A thematic analysis of such narratives is summarized in *Graph 4*, which shows two major thematic blocks. One of these deals with the intrinsic attributes of the products and contains narratives which either enumerate some doubts about the natural ingredients and traditional production methods or complain about the threats of such products, e.g. fattening. The second thematic block contains those narratives which are focused on the extrinsic weaknesses of these products in terms of presentation, packaging, labelling, price, availability, etc.

Such findings are in line with the international literature, especially in terms of the extrinsic weaknesses. The empirical studies from various cultural contexts suggest that consumers consider local, traditional, organic, and other types of alternative food products to be more expensive compared to the conventional products (Guthman, 2003; Barnett et al., 2005; Johnston et al., 2011, etc.). Indeed, in general, such products have a price premium which constitutes a heavy burden especially for consumers from less wealthy macro-economic contexts (Harrison et al., 2007; Koos, 2012) as it is the case of Romania where the price of the food products is the most important criteria of food choice, especially in the case of the economically disadvantaged consumers (Nistor, 2014 – see also the previous chapter). The importance of the price criterion in the representation of alternative food products was

previously described in Romania by Gherman (2014): the author showed that in connection with the organic food products, besides positive patterns like healthiness, price and availability are representing the negative patterns.



Graph 4. ***The weaknesses of the local food products***



Graph 5. ***Consumer segments and specific types of involvements with local food products***

Based on the focus-group discussions, it was possible to reveal six major consumer segments, each of them having a specific relationship with local food. Such segments are labelled as: unconcerned, discourse-based critics, critical tasters, enthusiastic tasters, "by-default" consumers, and engaged consumers.

Unconcerned consumers have low involvement with local food; for them, local food does not constitute an issue *per se* because these consumers' food choice is based on a habitual

who make continuous efforts for procuring local food and are more engaged in urban gardening initiatives are mostly from cities. Discursive-critical consumers are mostly young consumers with higher education, while the unconcerned consumers are usually older people who continuously emphasize their limited budget. Among the tasters, who have a situational involvement with local food, enthusiasts are mostly older people, while younger tasters are more critical. Finally, by-default consumers are mostly older people, while engaged consumers split between urban young, highly educated, independent people who are practising urban gardening, and people above 35 years old with families, who are setting up alternative networks for procuring local food and for whom the physical appearance of their children constitute an additional motivation for healthy eating.

Concluding remarks

The chapter above summarized the results of a focus-group-based research among Romanian urban residents concerning local-food-related attitudes. As it resulted from the discussions, local food is defined at the intersection between geography and tradition; local food means for the consumers a specific geographic origin ranging from adjacent (one's own garden) to more specific places (e.g. Romania) and/or a traditional product which implies old, genuine production methods, ingredients, and receipts. Such definitions are in line both with the official definition of the local/traditional products

in Romania and also confirm the findings or previous research in this respect (e.g. Unlock Market Research, 2011).

In terms of the patterns of local food, consumers are opposing a set of positive and negative aspects. While the positive aspects of local food are centred around intrinsic product attributes like healthy ingredients, traditional production methods, and sensory appeal, the negative attributes are expressions of extrinsic shortcomings in terms of high price, limited availability, etc. Thus, the local product is a multidimensional construct both in terms of its meanings and properties and consumers are frequently overlapping it with the meaning and properties of the organic products, they are practically developing similar representations to those in the case of organic products (see Gherman, 2014).

Local-food-related consumer behaviour resulted in six specific consumer segments with specific involvements: while unconcerned consumers are neutral towards local food, they base their consumption decision on the price criterion and choose the cheapest alternative, discourse-based critics show high theoretical involvement with local foods, but their doubts about product safety and extrinsic impediments like availability or the unjustified high price of the products retains them from an enduring involvement. Samplers are divided between sceptical consumers, who had high expectations from local food and local producers but then remained disappointed as their expectations were not met either in terms of extrinsic or intrinsic cues, and enthusiasts who are returning visitors of farmers' markets with a situational involvement motivated mostly by hedonistic values like sensory appeal and the pleasurable context of the markets.

Finally, enduring involvement with local food products occurs in two cases: 'by default', where consumers' relationship with local food products takes the form of self-supply and it reflects a habitual rather than a reflexive choice; engaged consumers are those in whose case choosing a local alternative is based on conscious, reflexive decisions, motivated mostly by health-concerns, status assignment, and by a general value shift towards downshifting.

The analysis suggested that interviewees consume those foods which they label as local mostly in the absence of a conscious decision concerning the sustainability of ethics. Egoistic concerns are dominant compared to broader ethical concerns. In general, it can be said that local food is consumed as a routine (e.g. the case of those who grow vegetables in their own garden), as entertainment (e.g. those who go to farmers' market), as health protection (those who choose local products more or less constantly), or as a status assignment fashion (e.g. those who frequent local food restaurants or are loyal to downshifting initiatives). In spite of this loose motivation in terms of ecological and social sustainability, the majority of the respondents – especially young, well-educated respondents – are aware that local food consumption has a number of benefits in terms of sustainability both concerning the producers and the environment.

If we accept the distinction that conscious consumption presupposes consumer awareness in connection with products, production processes, distribution, or impacts of goods (Willis and Schor, 2012: 160), while ethical consumption comprises the reflexivity in connection with the impact of consumption on others, it becomes obvious that in our case

local food choices seem to resemble rather conscious than ethical choices.

As already summarized elsewhere (Nistor, 2015), the literature on sustainable consumption assumes that through buying or avoiding certain food products citizen-consumers can be mobilized to address social and/or ecological injustices (Beagan et al., 2010; Johnston, 2008), and thus the adherents of various forms of alternative food consumption are forming a broader social movement which challenges the unsustainable and the unfair nature of global food production. Food citizens are also members of an imagined community of ideas and practices (Shaw, 2007) or they form 'neo-tribes' (Buman, 1992), and no matter that members of such communities are situated far away from each other they are linked together by the values and practices they share in connection with food consumption. In our case, this is not very much the case: even the most dedicated consumers of local foods (e.g. the participants of the online focus group) outlined the importance of product-based attributes and health-related concerns as the most important motivations of consuming local food (cf. Titarenko et al., 2012). Process-based attributes are important mainly in the sense of traditional production methods and – at least in terms of effective practices – they rarely correspond to motivations related to altruistic motives (e.g. supporting local farmers, minimize ecological footprints, etc.).

Thus, our data correspond much more to the observations of Szasz (2007), who considers that the turn towards alternative ways of consumption can be conceptualized in terms of individual safety and egocentric motives: by choosing to

consume such products, consumers try to protect themselves, and their motivations are individualist rather than political (cf. citizen-consumers). However, self-centred motivations are not enough for turning the discourse into practice, and local food consumption seems to be a rather infrequent practice. The research showed that this occurs due to a number of impediments which are in line with those mentioned in the literature (see the review of Feldmann and Hamm, 2015): by not having enough information about the role of local food consumption in generating sustainability, even the most engaged consumers of local foods do this practice for other reasons ("We hear all the time about healthy eating, but I do not get enough information about how I can help farmers… There are only a few occasions to meet them… What can I do?"); local food is perceived to be expensive, and even if there is knowledge about the role of local food in generating sustainability consumers cannot afford to enter the arena ("These are expensive products… I know that farmers have to invest in production and their living is dependent on what they sell. I cannot afford it, even if I want to"); scepticism regarding the intrinsic quality of the products ("Producers should think about that they will lose consumers if they are playing around with the products. I do not trust these products… Farmers also use pesticides, so what is the point?") or the extrinsic quality of the products ("I do not share the opinion that local products must not be packaged in a showy way. I think it is important how a product looks."); inefficient marketing ("It would be easier to find these products in the supermarkets. Farmers' markets are nice events, but you cannot rely solely on them. People are going several days a

week to a supermarket; if such products are there, they will cross them, so they will buy them, and so on…"); etc.

In spite of its various motivations and more or less (in)coherent practice, local food is very much debated reflexively. Besides anchoring it to certain geographies, local food is mostly perceived as "a trusting (re)connection between the anxious consumer and the responsive producer" (Clarke et al., 2008: 220). Ethics has only limited structuring power and – at least on the basis of the present research – it is more suitable to consider local food consumption in terms of aesthetics of consumption (Venkatesh and Meamber, 2008), meaning that consumers' decisions are motivated by strategies of identity constructions, self-preservation rather than by moral duties and responsibilities. Obviously, in order to better theorize the case of local food consumption in Romania, we need a more systematic research both in terms of qualitative and quantitative approaches.

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