

# EDUARDO'S APPLES

## The Co-Production of Personalized Food Relationships

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This article tells the modern love story of the organic grower Eduardo and the people who savor his apples. One remarkable paradigm shift when it comes to contemporary food culture is that the product's social, political and cultural entanglements are no longer hidden from view. This new context has created platforms where producers and consumers come together to co-produce. Here, I broaden the concept of co-production to account for the plurality of actors who contribute to engagements with food. My focus is on the online platform where the meaning of Eduardo's apples is co-produced through the immaterial labor of storytelling. Such food storytelling is the secret ingredient that is needed to forge affective bonds between local producers, individual consumers and global food companies.

*Keywords:* co-production, food, storytelling, foodways, immaterial labor

The apples I have bought for many years in Iceland have a small label on the skin that encouraged me to go online and meet the grower. I resisted the invitation for some time as I was doubtful that visiting a company's website would bring me closer to the man on the label.<sup>1</sup> When, however, I started to think more systematically about organic food I felt compelled to go online and meet the man behind the number.

Eventually I sat down and looked up the website of the organic fruit supplier Nature & More, typed in the number 573, and pressed enter.<sup>2</sup> In an instant a simple number metamorphosed into a virtual presentation of the organic grower Eduardo Welldt. What I first noticed was a digital postcard displaying the picture-perfect smile of Eduardo that serves as a stamp of authentication. Under the postcard is the joyful greeting: "Hi, I'm Eduardo and I grow lovely

apples in Chile!" In the lower right-hand corner of the screen is a YouTube video where the apple orchards set the stage for Eduardo's performance. He's clad in a plain, half-open shirt, and with a down-to-earth impression on his face. He looks me straight in the eye and tells the story of his family's organic farm set on a beautiful Chilean landscape. Well, that is what I imagine he's saying as I don't understand Spanish. The text found on the website does, however, explain all this in English. Even more importantly, Eduardo has stayed in my mind since I visited the website: I cannot buy his apples without picturing him standing in his apple orchard with a smiling face.

Asking what it means to eat an apple, empirical philosopher Annemarie Mol suggests how such a pleasurable act incorporates *exemplary situations*, worthy of further exploration. She emphasizes the



Ill. 1: The siblings Eduardo and Daniela. (Source: Nature & More 2013)

plurality of the act of eating foodstuffs such as an apple, and how it brings the social, cultural and the political together all in one bite (Mol 2008). As Eduardo's apples travel through different locales and social landscapes, I seek in the following to unravel the organic values and bonds of affection they build between producers and consumers.

The connection between producers and consumers has in the recent past been called "co-production," a concept where consumers become more involved in the production process. According to the Slow Food movement a co-producer is a person who cares about how the food was produced and takes various actions to support local producers. Co-production calls forth a moral imperative of individuals to contribute to the collective cause by upholding certain values relating to the food system. Slow Food defines co-production as the relationship between producers (like growers and farmers) and consumers.<sup>3</sup> I argue that this definition is too narrow. What I want to do here is to broaden the concept of co-production to account for the plurality of actors that contribute to contemporary engagements with food.

To further analyze the engagement of co-production I draw upon a number of scholars who reevaluate Marxist theories of social power, in order to explore how various actors make food production and consumption meaningful (Arvidsson 2005; Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee 2012; Hardt & Negri 2000; Johnston & Cairns 2012; Lazzarato 1996; Žižek

1997). To know the origin of food and how it was produced promotes transparency and creates trust between producers and consumers. This feeling of transparency rests, to a large extent, on the immaterial labor of food storytelling (narratives and images) that serves as a prerequisite for creating new social relations constructed by different actors within the contemporary food chain (Goodman, Maye & Holloway 2010; Roos, Terragni & Torjusen 2007).

One of the most remarkable paradigm shifts in contemporary food culture is that the product's social, political and cultural entanglements are no longer supposed to be hidden from view (Bryant & Goodman 2004; Köstlin 1998; Tschofen 1998). The story should now be integral to the product and help to create a desire to connect. This desire builds new platforms for producers and consumers to meet, exchange knowledge, and construct relationships (Roos, Terragni & Torjusen 2007). When describing these platforms it might be helpful to talk about a "foodscape" which can be thought of "as a social construction that captures and constitutes cultural ideals of how food relates to specific places, people and political-economic systems" (Johnston & Cairns 2012: 230). The case of Eduardo's apples is good for analyzing how deeply embedded values are sown into organic soil, then harvested, spiced with flavorful images and narratives, and finally consumed by organic consumers.

The question I seek to explore in further detail is: What can the story of Eduardo's apples tell us about newly constructed food relationships between local producers, individual consumers and global food companies?

### Nature & More

This article is based on the texts and images on the website of the organic fruit company Nature & More.<sup>4</sup> This online space provides consumers with opportunities to trace food in the global food system and it unites geographical and social threads by giving birth to new emotions and experiences through personalized representations of a place. This can be seen when the small local producers that Nature & More represent are introduced to global consumers

by name, images and stories. I analyze the narratives and images provided on Nature & More's website in order to see how they try to create bonds between growers and consumers.

My approach is partly informed by netnography, the study of online cultures and communities (Kozinets 2010). On the website of Nature & More, an online community is created by people who express their ideas and values by leaving comments and questions on the pages of individual growers.<sup>5</sup> This community is therefore comprised of people with shared interests and willingness to influence modern food culture by sharing their own narratives within the community. This highlights how the use of the Internet has expanded from gathering information to participating in digital platforms (Sveningsson, Lövheim & Bergquist 2003). What is interesting then is how social experiences are translated between the offline and the online world (Pripp 2010). However, the power structure is surely uneven as the company Nature & More is in a better position to shape the context of the online encounters between producers and consumers through control of the information and images found on the website. On the other hand, the company does not control the comments and the questions that the community raises. The online fieldwork conducted for this article therefore sheds light on how people weave together local practices and global communities in order to negotiate the meaning of everyday foodways.

Almost every time we go shopping, whether it is at the supermarket or online, we are introduced to a handful of people who are connected to the food on which we will soon be feasting. No food, it seems, is so humble in origin that it comes without a lengthy narrative and images that sustain and nurture its cultural roots. Natural and organic produce is particularly ripe for such storytelling as narratives of origin accompany the products and forge an unbroken link through time and space and between people and places (Johnston, Biro & MacKendrick 2009). While images and narratives serve the purpose of bringing consumers and producers closer, this feeling of "direct" connection, however, would not be possible without the modern development

of the global food chain. Furthermore, each link in the food chain is comprised of different actors, some more visible than others, that contribute to how the production and consumption of food is understood.

The apple grower Eduardo belongs to a big group of growers who are represented by the company Nature & More. The company is also the "trace & tell" trademark of the mother company *Eosta* that claims to be the leading European distributor of organic fresh fruits and vegetables. The "trace & tell" system operates exactly as described above; products from individual growers carry a label with a picture of the grower and a corresponding code. The website of Nature & More even provides an instructional video that helps people get in (virtual) touch with their growers.<sup>6</sup> The tutorial opens with the logo of Nature & More, followed by an aerial view panning across a field of flowers, before zooming in on a little store that sells, it seems, only fruits and vegetables. Inside the store a woman is shopping and she suddenly notices the label on the pineapple she holds in her hand. She finishes the purchase and the camera follows her cycling journey home through animated environment. At home the woman notices the label again, she takes the pineapple out of the shopping bag, and decides to look up the grower on her iPad. In the blink of an eye, she, as well as everyone who watches the video, is transported to another part of the world where the pineapple grower greets her and other viewers with a reassuring wink. The video thus outlines the desired emotional and cognitive content of the experience, illustrated at the end of the video when the woman falls in love with the concept and graphic hearts appear. The video depicts the awakening of desire, when the woman notices the label, and the fulfillment of this same desire when she is able to connect to the grower behind the label. This, of course, results in instant affection that emphasizes how designing the experience has become an intrinsic part of making the product itself (Desmet & Hassenzahl 2012).

The "trace & tell" system received the Ecocare Awards for sustainable projects in the year 2012. The jury's argument was that with the "trace & tell" system, Nature & More had succeeded in bridging the

gap between producers and consumers by setting up a direct communication line. After winning the awards, the CEO of Eosta and founder of Nature & More, Volkert Engelsman said:

We are very happy with this recognition, because we are convinced that sustainability is impossible without transparency. With Nature & More we want to show our organic grower's dedication and commitment towards a better world. By telling the grower's story we hope to break through the anonymity barrier of the store shelves and empower the consumer to make conscious buying decisions.<sup>7</sup>

According to the website the goal of Nature & More is to communicate individual growers' efforts for the betterment of the planet and its people.<sup>8</sup> What first becomes interesting is the non-businesslike language of the company and the growers they represent. The focus is instead on communicating the dedication of organic growers, which highlights the role of the company as a cultural broker who facilitates meetings between consumers and producers. Any description of the company as a sophisticated enterprise with departmentalization of specific tasks and roles (including sales and logistics) is left out. The role of the company as communicator is also emphasized by the sheer volume of information, narratives and images available on its website. The underlying message is that we should buy from these growers not *just* because their livelihood depends on it (paying for their children's education, mortgage, electric bills, etc.), but to reward their good work as responsible entrepreneurs. The dedication of those growers, working for a better world, brings out the ethical dimension of the transaction. It is however worth keeping in mind, as noted by Bryant and Goodman, that narratives emphasizing support for growers and farmers in the rural South can serve to neutralize and sustain uneven power relations between producers in the South and consumers in the North (Bryant & Goodman 2004). The narrative of dedicated growers moralizes both the act of production and consumption, turning consumers' eve-

ryday food choices into morally charged acts – acts of redemption (Goodman, Maye & Holloway 2010; Johnston & Cairns 2012).

The video of the woman buying a pineapple can be considered a moral guide that not only promotes personal virtue, but also helps to establish loyalty to a specific brand. Such loyalty is highly valued in modern business and crucial in forging relationships with returning customers. The value of a brand is for the most part based on a collective community that consumers help to sustain by their purchasing choices (Arvidsson 2005: 235–236). Thus, in modern marketing a brand's image is one of the most valuable assets of a company. Nature & More is a good example of a brand that has managed to produce an image to which people have positive associations. The video that instructs consumers on how to connect with growers provides the sort of experience necessary to build a brand. This is evident in the beginning of the video when the logo appears as an empty sign that is then given meaning by the following narrative and images.

In the spirit of corporate social responsibility the marketing of organic corporations draws extensively on images and personal narratives. These narratives bring pioneers (the founders, farmers and growers) into focus as they share their personal stories and contribute to the making of a company brand. Furthermore, brands depend on these narratives to establish moral connections between producers and consumers (Bryant & Goodman 2004; Johnston, Biro & MacKendrick 2009; Johnston & Cairns 2012). In the narrative promoted by Nature & More growers like Eduardo are not the only ones who are brought to the table, but also the CEO of Eosta and the founder of Nature & More, Volkert Engelsman. Volkert is also a board member of IFOAM (International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements), a worldwide umbrella organization for the organic movement, with over 750 member organizations in 116 countries.<sup>9</sup> Both the photo of Volkert and the narrative that accompanies it are very organic, so to speak, as he is shown doing one of his favorite things: "checking out organic compost in South Africa."<sup>10</sup> In the picture he is holding soil in

his hands that has various symbolic connotations. A point often made is that organic practices revolve around the health of the soil, which eventually provides nutrients for plants to grow.<sup>11</sup> Organic practices build the foundation, necessary for everything else to grow: the picture of Volkert holding organic soil in his hands is a powerful visualization of this particular ideology. If metaphors are cognitive tools that aid us in structuring our thoughts and practices, as noted by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), then the healthy organic soil that fosters the roots stresses the importance of origin, sustainability and a healthy lifestyle in the face of an uncertain future.<sup>12</sup>

Even though the CEO must have a lot of administrative chores on his plate, given the chance, he still likes to go back to the foundation and carry out his passion. Similar to the story of the growers, this narrative emphasizes the commitment of the CEO in promoting the image of the company as trustworthy. Sustainability is the core philosophy of Nature & More and the company developed the “sustainability flower” as a guide so consumers could see for themselves how individual growers were measuring up against the expectations of Nature & More. The flower measures sustainability according to the important categories of ecological conservation, animal welfare and social justice. The company also points out that the sustainable attributes of products are often lost in the anonymity of the marketplace, allowing for both ecological and social exploitation. The company thus seeks to address these problems by increasing transparency and by attempting to “replace exploitation by solidarity.”<sup>13</sup> Consumers that enter the website of Nature & More are therefore given the chance to evaluate the ethical implications of their choices and put their values into practice. Under Eduardo’s sustainability flower one can find information about what goes on at the Nancagua farm. Under a rubric that proclaims freedom, justice and solidarity, we learn that the workers are able to participate in a school program and have all finished secondary school. Courses that focus on the integration of women into the workforce, on healthy food and world economics can also be found at the farm. Furthermore, the

workers are provided with additional health and life insurance because of the even hierarchy at the farm that enables them to be a part of the decision-making process. In the end, buying apples from Eduardo seems to be a reasonable thing to do. In fact, it seems almost immoral not to do it.

### Fetishizing Organic Apples

When browsing through all this information on the website of Nature & More I could not help but wonder what Karl Marx would have thought about the notion of social transformation through consumption accomplished in the market place. When Marx formulated the concept of “commodity fetishism,” almost 150 years ago, he explained how industrial products obscured the relations of their productions. According to Marx, social relations between people were reformulated as relations between objects, bought and sold as commodities at the marketplace, creating a perception of the commodity as having intrinsic qualities and value that can only be measured against other commodities (Marx [1867]1978). This leads some to believe that in Communism the commodity fetishism would disappear and be replaced by transparent and just relations between people. This desire for transparency seems to have survived both the rise and decline of communist states, and is nowadays found in, among other things, the interest of knowing where one’s food comes from. Companies such as Nature & More capitalize on this interest as they promise to deliver transparency to concerned consumers by revealing the story behind the food (Roos, Terragni & Torjusen 2007).

Slavoj Žižek maintains that the “commodity fetish” is still very much with us in modern Western societies (1997). To support his claim, Žižek provides a couple of examples. Films on DVDs nowadays always come with bonus material, portraying the *making of the movie*. The *making of the movie* disc affords insight into the magic behind the movie, but mysteriously that magic loses none of its wonder by revealing the tricks of its production. Žižek compares this to the magician who explains his tricks, but even after the magic has been de-mystified it loses none of its power to astonish.

Here, Žižek concludes, “commodity fetishism” has been turned on its head or extended beyond its original object: it is not *only* the commodity that is fetishized but *also* the mode of its production and the attendant relations between people. Although the mode of production has been fetishized, however, it still hides from view the means through which ruling social structures are reproduced. With the example of the bonus material, the *making of* disc, it is clear that people are promised a peek “behind the scenes,” which is presented as a direct revelation of an unmediated *reality* behind the images. This unmediated reality, however, renders invisible the camerawork that goes into its production. There are always cameras behind the cameras we are shown and the cameras behind the cameras frame this particular version of reality.

This is visible when people go online to “meet the growers” who produce their food. The video of Eduardo is a good example of this magic in action and it illustrates the *making of an apple*. The online introduction of Eduardo thus conjures up a certain representation of reality that echoes the longing for authentic relations between producers and consumers (Ristilampi 1995). In order to shed light on a new economy, Håkan Jönsson has pointed out how “old-fashioned milk,” as a modern value-added product, could only have been made possible by “advanced marketing, production and distribution systems of the modern dairy companies” (Jönsson 2005: 113). Modern rationality (the complex food production and distribution system) and the magical (the image production) are therefore equally important factors in making commodities like old-fashioned milk. Jönsson calls this “magical rationality” and argues that it is evidence of how new technology can be perceived as magic (Jönsson 2005: 112–113). One example, as noted by Banet-Weiser, is how media technology tends to blur the boundaries between consumer and producer and “hinges upon the notion of the disappearance of the former middleman or gatekeeper between producers and consumers” (Banet-Weiser 2012: 49).

A visit to the growers, represented by the company Nature & More, obviously downplays the role

of the middlemen (the two global companies Nature & More and Eosta) while erasing the geographical and social structures mediating the encounter. On the other hand, the presentation of CEO Volkert Engelsman, as well as of other members of staff at Nature & More, bears witness to how the company aims to shed light on its own ethical role in the process of producing, transporting and consuming organic food. The growers carry out production in six continents and the fruits are sold throughout Europe and “beyond.” While the physical impossibility of following every link of the food chain is obvious, the notion of virtually created transparency clearly offers new possibilities of attachment between different actors within the foodscape.

What’s more, new technology that allows people to visit growers like Eduardo online is instrumental in creating new experiences that weave together the local and the global, or what has been called local-in-the-global (Pieterse 1995; Roos, Terragni & Torjusen 2007). Such encounters describe how locally situated practices are negotiated globally. While food is produced, procured and consumed in various local situations, the website of Nature & More brings different actors together in a virtual space that creates bonds between producers and consumers. The virtual encounters that occur on the website of Nature & More thus weaken the local–global dichotomy as the production and the consumption of organic food is simultaneously local and global. When visiting a grower like Eduardo one almost gets the feeling that the only thing missing is for him to reach for an apple on the tree and hand it over through the screen. Through such sensuous experiences and shared values all systemic contradictions disintegrate in an instant: as we sit facing the growers in this modern enchantment the co-production can begin.

### The Co-Producers

The Slow Food movement claims to have coined the term “co-producer” to describe “an individual who goes beyond the passive role of a consumer to take an active interest in who produces our food, their methods, the problems they face and the impact on the world around us.”<sup>14</sup> The concept emphasizes agency,

rather than passivity, and empowers individuals who vote with their wallets each time they go to the grocery store, the farmers' market, or surf the web looking for information and products.

As far as food goes, the notion of co-producers is one of the critical points where politics and consumerism come together under the banner of "ethical consumption," a concept defined as central to how individuals understand and try to solve social and ecological problems (Johnston, Szabo & Rodney 2011). To be an ethical consumer highlights one of the major ideological shifts under neoliberalism, the shift of responsibility from collective movements like the labor movement and consumer organizations, to the shoulders of individual consumers (Autio, Heiskanen & Heinonen 2009; Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee 2012; Moisander 2001, 2007). As the individual takes on more responsibility, moral virtue (of consumers and companies) becomes ever more important and translates into growing cultural capital (Vogel 2005; Tjærnemo 2001). Companies that give the impression that they care about social and environmental issues harness cultural capital that attracts consumers and investors, eventually turning that cultural capital into economic capital.

The company Nature & More tries to shoulder this responsibility and facilitate moral virtue by providing the transparency needed to make enlightened and empowering decisions about consumption. To be able to do that consumers need the story of how the product was produced and how it affects the environment, animal welfare and other people. Transparency and traceability are therefore "tools in communicating the production story to consumers" (Roos, Terragni & Torjusen 2007: 7).

On the website of Nature & More, Eduardo tells the story of the family farm Nancagua and explains the importance of upholding traditions like growing medicinal herbs. Eduardo also describes how the farm is a part of the family enterprise Puelche S.A. Hierbas, founded by his parents, and has over a hundred employees. Eduardo's brothers and sisters all work for the family business and they try to assure the traceability and sustainability of the farm and its products.<sup>15</sup> The production story therefore

relates the act of buying apples to upholding social values and invites consumers to see their ethical commitment through by supporting Eduardo and his family.

Such narratives of origin guarantee the authenticity of the food by connecting it to the place of production, the producer himself and his historical traditions (Johnston & Baumann 2010; Høyrup & Munk 2007; Larsen 2011). The communicated production story denotes transparency and is essential to experience the authenticity of buying products from growers that people can bond with and whom they trust. According to Johnston and Baumann, small-scale producers and family farmers are often seen as producers of "simple" food. The "simple" label refers to the production of unprocessed and unadulterated food and the distance from the complications of industrialized life (Johnston & Baumann 2010: 76). Such food is considered authentic when this "simple" way of life is believed to certify the honesty and the sincerity of the producers.

The notion of the simple life also refers to contemporary ideas about an idyllic past, before a time when industrialization dramatically changed agriculture and brought about the modern food system (Belasco 1989; Guthman 2004; Trubek 2011). In recent decades modern food production and consumption have been seriously questioned, culminating in various food scandals (Atkins & Bowler 2001; Nerlich 2004), which in turn has fueled the desire for more sustainable and healthy food (Fromartz 2006; Burke 2007). In organic food growing practices the use of synthetic fertilizers is not allowed, growth hormones for animals are also forbidden, as well as most types of pesticides.<sup>16</sup> This explains for most part why organic food production is considered by many to epitomize the kind of sustainable food production that was practiced before industrialization transformed the whole system. Organic food therefore often has an aura of purity and virtuosity that consumers can relate to when they meet the growers who produce their food.

When Nature & More praises the commitment of individual organic growers the company implies that they will not shy away from responsibil-

ity when it comes to food production. The trait of personalizing organic growers, such as Eduardo, also serves to legitimize the good aura associated with the food they produce. The company creates the perception of being virtuous by making it possible for consumers to connect with producers. In return, consumers express gratitude and emotional affection that cements the contemporary food relationships emerging from the social context of co-production. These moral dimensions all play a part in why people become interested in getting to know producers and seek what they consider to be ethically sound products. To label certain food as ethically “good” can however be problematic as it creates a dichotomy between “good” and “bad” food, with not so much space in between (Trubek 2011).

The ability to co-produce food, such as organic apples, depends likewise on what has been termed “immaterial labor,” which revolves around human contact and interaction. This type of labor produces service, cultural products, knowledge and communication. Immaterial labor, according to Lazzarato, relates to the cultural practices that produce the social context of production itself (Lazzarato 1996). Another aspect of immaterial labor is “affective labor,” which produces, in the words of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, “a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (Hardt & Negri 2000: 293). As an example, the scholars point to personnel within health services who primarily carry out caring and affective labor that is based on contact between people. This is analogous to organic farmers who are portrayed as caretakers of the earth, who produce healthy and environmentally sustainable food. Affective labor brings emotions into play and ultimately produces social networks and new forms of community (Hardt & Negri 2000).

On the website of Nature & More one finds the heading “At your service”. Below the heading people are told that if they contact the company they will most likely be dealing with these people: Alex van Erp (web and sustainability co-ordinator) and Michael Wilde (communication and sustainability

manager)<sup>17</sup> This is the staff responsible for carrying out immaterial labor at the company by providing services that connect consumers with producers. The staff does so by producing narratives and images that help consumers to emotionally bond with producers and their products. This immaterial labor produces and upholds certain organic values that the apples from Eduardo come to materialize. The facilitation of online meetings between producers and consumers relies therefore both on immaterial and material labor.

In addition, by making it possible to connect to the company through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr, social media plays a big part in this process by providing a conduit for immaterial labor. Social media encourages personal participation, making it a valuable tool for companies and individuals who seek to promote products. While companies often include social media such as Facebook in their marketing strategies, what is maybe more interesting is how company websites themselves have been turned into social media sites. This is no doubt the case with Nature & More. Not only does the site provide standard information, it also produces relations between the producers it represents and potential consumers. Such company websites therefore create cultural spaces and communities that are shaped by the lived experience of consumers as they give feedback to the production process as well as the products.

### **“Love Your Apples”**

After watching the video of Eduardo I noticed that people were encouraged to write messages on the website and let the producers know what they were thinking. I scrolled down and saw that a handful of people had left comments. They were from all over the world and posed all kinds of questions, but most demonstrated a bond of affection by noting how much they appreciate the apples from Eduardo and his family. Surprisingly, I noticed that at least four Icelanders had left messages on the website, which indicates the potential popularity of these apples in Iceland. Having bought apples from Chile, Inga Rún Sæmundsdóttir, had this to say:

Dear Eduardo, I really liked your apple – I watched you on youtube, but didn't understand anything. But that is okay, because the apple was good. Regards,  
Inga Rún from Iceland.<sup>18</sup>

I was pleased to see I was not the only one having trouble understanding what Eduardo was saying, but it is obvious that it does not really matter. The apples taste good and Inga Rún is grateful for somebody like Eduardo who produces them. In the comment Inga Rún expresses her affection by addressing Eduardo directly. The fact that she went through the entire process of punching in the number on the label and watching the video, shows that Inga Rún has already embraced this new possibility of engagement. All the greetings on the website are in fact directed towards Eduardo, which testifies to the extent to which consumers have internalized the narrative of the commitment of the growers emphasized by Nature & More. A mutual agreement has been struck between the growers and consumers: if the grower cares for the environment and for me, I will also care for him.

Another commentator from Iceland, Kristjana Brund Bárðardóttir, had this to say to Eduardo (under the heading "Love your apples"):

Thank you for growing these apples and selling them here in Selfoss, Iceland. They are the best! I'd like the wrapping of the apples to be more ecological, but you are forgiven for that because you are sending them such a long way and they are so good.

Applewishes  
:-) KHB.<sup>19</sup>

The carbon footprint from flying apples in from Chile to Iceland does not seem to worry Kristjana too much and she is prepared to turn a blind eye when it comes to the plastic packaging because she really appreciates the apples. The gratitude towards Eduardo emphasizes the emotional connection produced on the website. The website also produces a virtual community where issues like pros and cons

of food wrapping and carbon foot prints can be negotiated. People such as Kristjana take part in building this community at Nature & More by adding their own narrative to the mix.

The food scholar Amy B. Trubek has noted that in the discourse on "good" food, the *quality* of the food has become more and more central as it combines "sensory tastes, moral values, and an ethic" (Trubek 2011: 194). Both the quotations above state how good the apples from Eduardo taste, indicating how organic values are embodied. To know the personal story of the producer therefore adds value to the products and enhances the sensory experience. In Kristjana's case, the quality of the apples even threatens to override the concern for the environment.

After Kristjana had posted her comment, Alex, the web and sustainability co-ordinator working at Nature & More, replied:

Thank you for your comment Kristjana! Great to hear you love the apples. I will answer for Eduardo because he did not pack the apples himself, they were packed with Nature & More in Holland. The apples are packed in a bag that is certified 100% compostable according to EN13432. It can be thrown away with the organic waste and in that way it is as ecological as possible at the moment.<sup>20</sup>

The conversation continues when Kristjana replies and asks Alex whether the black foam trays, in which the apples come, are compostable. Alex answers that the black foam trays are not from the company in the Netherlands but he could check on this in more detail. He would just need the code on the packaging. When all is said and done, Kristjana seems to be rather satisfied with the service and promises to take a better look at the packaging and to find out whether the apples are repacked in Iceland, and if so, by whom.

At no point does Eduardo enter the conversation and his lack of presence can maybe be considered suspicious keeping in mind that Nature & More received awards for setting up "direct" communication between producers and consumers. Eduardo,

however, serves more as an overarching symbol – he is a face on a label glued to the surface of a fruit. The people who leave comments on the website of Nature & More have never met Eduardo, not even exchanged messages with him online; nonetheless, he is indispensable for creating the cultural context where new food commitments and relationships can be forged.

The communication between Kristjana and Alex is affective labor that produces the desired feeling of wellbeing and appreciation. Alex works hard to provide the information Kristjana is looking for and she has volunteered to gather information for the company about how the apples are packed in Iceland. In the end, by providing the company with valuable information that will improve the business, Kristjana can possibly be of greater service to Nature & More than they can be to her. All of the actors are crucial in providing a meaningful framework for the production process itself. Consumers that visit the website of Nature & More are therefore given the opportunity to make their personal narratives a part of the production process, despite only being able to talk to Alex instead of Eduardo.

## Conclusion

Why did I originally buy organic apples from Eduardo? Well, I wanted to do the right thing by supporting growers in distant countries that cared about the environment and their employees who did the actual physical labor. I also believed the apples to be healthier because the production had to comply with organic standards, making them free from pesticides and other things I wanted to keep as far away from my body as possible. Not surprisingly, I also found the apples to be the best tasting ones in Iceland. Like Inga Rún and Kristjana, the two Icelanders that left messages on the website of Nature & More, I was trying to make my everyday food consumption both responsible and meaningful by getting to know growers like Eduardo.

My own narrative about wanting to meet Eduardo is of course part of a moral zeitgeist that I have sought to explain with the concept of co-production, but the idea emerges very clearly in the discourse

of “ethical consumption”: an idea in which people express their desire to influence the world through personal consumption. The concept highlights the communication between different actors within the food chain and how emotional ties are established between producers and consumers. The co-production process depends on affective labor that articulates cultural meanings in the form of narratives and images. By performing the essential affective labor, the staff at Nature & More shapes the social context that influences the material production itself. The platform that Nature & More provides is crucial for involving consumers and allowing them to express their deeply held convictions and values. On this, rather new, online platform consumers bring in their own narratives that influence and negotiate the meaning of production and consumption of food.

The stories and images of producers and their products create a feeling of transparency that is needed to establish new kinds of relationships between producers and consumers. If capitalism makes the social relations of production invisible, then co-production, through narratives and images, aims to make these relations both visible and intimate. By explaining organic practices at his farm, the family traditions and the fairness of production, Eduardo manufactures transparency and provides consumers with a rationale for buying his apples. Amid food scandals and the awareness of environmental and social costs of the current food systems, one key feature of this new relationship is the notion of *trust*. The visual presentation and the narrative of Eduardo establish trust, a key component for consolidating the brand of Nature & More.

Apart from the rationale for buying organic food, transparency is also a prerequisite for the creation of the cultural space where consumers can express their gratitude towards Eduardo. The connection between Eduardo and consumers emotionalizes his apples and the aura of authenticity that adds value to the product. As a result the apples become materialized values that consumers eventually embody.

Co-production brings people closer by providing biographical narratives and images of individual producers and their products, while simultaneously

downplaying the complex and centralized corporate structure that actualize the virtual meetings between producers and consumers. When companies such as Nature & More promote the image of themselves as being cultural brokers rather than conventional middlemen, they deploy a considerable amount of cultural capital in the hope of attracting consumers. This deployment opens up a dialogue on the website and such a dialogue can go in many directions. The danger of sustaining existing power structures should obviously not be underestimated and criticism that has often been raised is that contemporary problems cannot be addressed by promoting consumption. For many consumers, visiting growers might *just* be a form of entertainment that soon becomes tiresome or an honest attempt at moral bookkeeping. Similarly, the story of the CEO of Nature & More with good intentions is maybe nothing more than a marketing gimmick.

This line of thought, however, can lead to a false dichotomy that fails to grasp the complex relationship people have with food. The affectionate bonds of co-production as seen on the website of Nature & More, I argue, can also lead to thoughtful questions about the food chain. Instead of seeing the website only as a space where one can get to know growers like Eduardo, one could also take the opportunity to approach the global company directly. Why should we not know Alex van Erp if we know growers like Eduardo? Such shared narratives could maybe forge new social relations, new ideas, that could ameliorate power relations within the foodscape. What people gain by engaging in the production and consumption of food is therefore not predetermined.

The website of Nature & More is an online space where personalized representations of growers and places bring together the geographical and the social. The act of going online to meet growers therefore sheds light on how locally situated practices mediate global encounters. This can best be seen when Kristjana buys a couple of organic apples in Iceland and decides to go online and meet Eduardo from Chile. She thanks Eduardo for the apples, they taste good, but she ends up in a conversation with Alex from Nature & More. The conversation on the

website ends where Kristjana and Alex promise to help each other out to create meaning out of food production and consumption. I will, however, end this particular story by concluding that all those characters are important in what could be called the modern co-production of personalized food relationships.

## Notes

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- 2 [www.natureandmore.com/](http://www.natureandmore.com/). Accessed January 28, 2013.
- 3 See the Slow Food website for more information about the concept of co-production: [www.slowfood.com/](http://www.slowfood.com/). Accessed February 5, 2013.
- 4 [www.natureandmore.com/](http://www.natureandmore.com/). Accessed January 28, 2013. The company has its head office in Waddinxveen in the Netherlands.
- 5 Like every research method, netnography has ethical implications and being a virtual “lurker” can certainly be problematic. However, the forum on the webpage of Nature & More does not deal with sensitive matters and the corporate website must be considered as a public space in comparison to personal blogs and websites.
- 6 [www.natureandmore.com/about-us](http://www.natureandmore.com/about-us). Accessed February 6, 2013.
- 7 [www.eosta.com/node/385](http://www.eosta.com/node/385). Accessed October 8, 2013.
- 8 [www.natureandmore.com/about-us/about-us](http://www.natureandmore.com/about-us/about-us). Accessed February 6, 2013.
- 9 [www.ifoam.org/](http://www.ifoam.org/). Accessed February 14, 2013.
- 10 [www.natureandmore.com/about-us/who-we-are](http://www.natureandmore.com/about-us/who-we-are). Accessed February 6, 2013.
- 11 [www.ota.com/organic/benefits/soil.html](http://www.ota.com/organic/benefits/soil.html). Accessed July 5, 2013.
- 12 For more discussion on metaphors and the rhetoric of food, see e.g. Jacobsen (2004).
- 13 [www.natureandmore.com/about-us/flower](http://www.natureandmore.com/about-us/flower). Accessed February 6, 2013.
- 14 [www.slowfood.com/](http://www.slowfood.com/). Accessed February 5, 2013.
- 15 [www.natureandmore.com/growers/puelche-s.a.-nancagua](http://www.natureandmore.com/growers/puelche-s.a.-nancagua). Accessed February 6, 2013.
- 16 [www.ifoam.org/en/organic-landmarks/principles-organic-agriculture](http://www.ifoam.org/en/organic-landmarks/principles-organic-agriculture). Accessed July 5, 2013.
- 17 [www.natureandmore.com/about-us/who-we-are](http://www.natureandmore.com/about-us/who-we-are). Accessed February 6, 2013.
- 18 [www.natureandmore.com/growers/puelche-s.a.-nancagua](http://www.natureandmore.com/growers/puelche-s.a.-nancagua). Accessed February 6, 2013.

- 19 www.natureandmore.com/growers/puelche-s.a.-nancagua. Accessed February 6, 2013.
- 20 www.natureandmore.com/growers/puelche-s.a.-nancagua. Accessed February 6, 2013.

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