

Food Connect(s)

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Much of our food does not taste good—and not just because apples have lost their crunch. The food we eat in the West is produced largely through an industrial model of agriculture. Larger and larger farms produce more and more of the one product, whether cattle or wheat, apricots or almonds, oranges or lemons. In the process, agricultural land is robbed of its nutrients, and animals and plants their dignity. But everywhere people, like Robert Pekin from Food Connect, are innovating with ways of working *with* the land, animals and others.

At Food Connect, we're not just modifying, we're completely reinventing the business of how food should be done. We're saying that the old model is obsolete and we have to invent new ones. We have to restore ecological biodiversity back into our farming landscapes but we need a marketplace that recognises and rewards the farmers who do this, and that encourages more farmers to do more of it.

People are developing all sorts of innovations around food production, distribution and consumption. Some initiatives *gift food*. For example, there are open community gardens where anyone can take the produce (even if they don't work in the gardens), and there are programs that use excess food from restaurants in meals for marginalised groups. Some initiatives *share food*. For example, in community kitchens anyone can come along and collectively cook and share food. Some initiatives *share land*. For example, in some urban neighbourhoods, property owners share their land (even their front and backyards) with urban farmers and then share in the produce.

Then there are initiatives where the terms of trade reflect concerns about the well-being of those who work the land. For example, there are fair and direct trade arrangements that provide fair prices for small and marginalised farmers in the majority world. In the minority world, there are initiatives like Community Supported Agriculture that develop fair and direct trade arrangements with farmers, as Robert Pekin explains.

Traditionally farmers send their produce to the market, and a buyer pays cash right there, as does the retailer and then the

consumer. But the farmer doesn't get paid for sixty to ninety days. At Food Connect we've reversed all that.

Our members pay a subscription in advance. Some of them pay twelve months in advance. And we pay the farmer on the knocker when they deliver the produce. And the farmer sets the price.

This is how it works. Because our members pay in advance, we have a big spreadsheet of what we need at different times of the year and we say to a farmer "There's a window of opportunity to grow something for us here in November, it would be great if it was something green. You work out what the price is that you want, set it flat and come back and tell us." And the farmer will go "Beauty! Normally at the peak of the season I get this price, but then we have to pay all these costs and really I'm only selling 60% of my crop because the market will only accept a certain look. With Food Connect I'm now going to sell 100% of my crop because they'll take a bit of leaf damage or hail damage. And I don't have to grade my produce. And I can reuse my boxes. And they're going to consolidate my freight because I can send it in with other farmers. And then there's all the other intangibles. They're going to connect me with other farmers because at Food Connect they encourage farmers to work together and learn from each other, and not see each other as competitors."

We're taking farmers out of the business-as-usual economic paradigm that provides no security around the price. The farmer sets a flat price that we pay when the produce is delivered. And it also means that farmers instead of investing in say \$250,000 to \$500,000 for a grading machine can invest in looking after the land.

The diverse economic practices that we're seeing reflect a growing awareness of the interdependencies between producers and consumers. In the case of Community Supported Agriculture initiatives like Food Connect, the interdependency is so strong that consumers pay in advance and thereby agree to share the risks of agriculture with the farmer—hence, some people now refer to it as Community *Shared* Agriculture. We're also seeing how the closer relationship between producer and consumer can support and encourage farming practices that are more environmentally sustainable.

For farmers in Food Connect the real incentive is the contact with the people who eat their food. We run farm tours to our growers. And everytime our farmers cannot stop talking. They have never had so many questions about what they do or been so acknowledged. Farmers are almost in tears because people have come out to see what they do and they have hugged them and thanked them. People say, "I love

what you're doing to your land. I love that you've got this nature strip over there, and you preserve this wetland area, and that you've got this field lying fallow over there, and you're growing this great produce, and you're doing it all without chemicals."

We just had a farm tour two weeks ago and I was talking to the honey grower afterwards and he said "I got all these thank-you cards." How many farmers get thank you cards from the people who eat their produce?

Another set of critical relationships are those in the "work"places that are scattered along the chain of connection between producer and consumer. These workplaces range from the volunteer groups who manage and run community gardens and community kitchens to the centres of formal paid employment. Just as an ethic of care can characterize relationships between producers, consumers and the environment, so too we can find an ethic of care in these workplaces.

Money is not a great measure of happiness or feeling that your life is contributing to something whilst you're on Planet Earth. So within Food Connect we're talk in terms of a living wage. We ask what is a living wage? And we're exploring that question openly with everyone at Food Connect. So we work backwards from saying that a living wage means being able to send your kids to the school they want, and to buy or have a house.

We have also decided that people need to be paid differently because there are "responsibles", people who make weighty decisions around the business and finances; there are the coordinators who harmonise things and coordinate the doing; and then there are the co-workers, people who do the leg work. So we have a hierarchy, but it's a horizontal hierarchy with some people out front breaking new ground and others coming along behind pulling it all together. We've decided to have no more than a two to one ratio between the highest and lowest pay rates.

We're doing a couple of other things. We are a not-for-profit company limited by shares, and the only shareholders are our workers. Once someone has been at Food Connect for three years they can become a shareholder.

We also have seasonal reviews at Food Connect. So the co-workers evaluate the coordinators, the coordinators evaluate the responsibles, and the responsibles evaluate the board of management. But in the evaluation process people are saying "Oh, this is what it takes to become a coordinator or a responsible." So by osmosis they're actually starting to learn

the skills and qualities they need to develop if they want to be a coordinator or a responsible.

Some of the apples might have lost their crunch, but there is work going on across the planet to produce food in ways that will sustain the environment and nurture humans. Living—and eating—in the anthropocene means connecting with and committing to these innovative practices that are foregrounding the interdependencies between humans and between humans and the planet.

With these interdependencies you have to think less about yourself and more about others. And this is a struggle, but that's what's needed at the moment. If you're serious about changing what humans have done to the environment and to other people, you have to step up to the mark and enter into a higher order of relationships with others and with the planet.

Examples of Initiatives

Community Gardening:

Newcastle Community Garden Project, <http://ps3beta.com/project/7733>

Community Kitchens:

Kumera Community Kitchen, <http://kumerakitchen.blogspot.com/>

Land sharing:

Neighbourhood Supported Agriculture, www.communityrootsboulder.com/;

Landshare, <http://www.landshare.net/>

Fair and Direct Trade:

Alter Trade Japan, <http://www.altertrade.co.jp/english/index-e.html>

Community Supported Agriculture:

Food Connect, <http://www.foodconnect.com.au/>

Beanstalk, <http://beanstalk.org.au/>