



Slow Food®

Snail pace

Australia - New Zealand

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CO-PRODUCER

_by David Szanto

What's in a name?

In Hollywood film credits, you can usually catch a couple of names credited as “co-producer”. It may be a screenwriter with a lawyer who knows how to cut a deal, a senior crew member being thrown a bone or perhaps the Director’s boyfriend. What you don’t see is the resentment behind the scenes. Irritable producers who have raised the money, found the talent, managed the budget, hot tempers and negotiations with studios. People who make things take pride in that making, and for them the word “producer” carries meaning. Adding a prefix and ascribing it to someone who does what exactly? It doesn’t bring a lot of warm feelings in Tinsel Town as is the case, I have found, in Food Land.

Last year, along with two colleagues from the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Italy, I researched farmers’ markets in North America, Ireland, and the U.K. The work was on behalf of the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, which

is interested in bringing the best practices of such markets to Italy. As Terra Madre 2006 was to be focused heavily on the short production chain, I tested out the emerging Slow Food idea of “co-producer” during my research, both as a concept and as a word. I spoke with farmers, artisan producers and processors as well as with those individuals formerly known as consumers. Reaction to the concept was mixed but responses to the word were primarily negative.

“Co-producer” is a concept I like very much and as an expression it can be very useful in introducing the idea that consumers have a role and responsibility in making change within a food chain. Alternatively, the overwhelming reaction I encountered is that using the word puts rhetoric before reality. Though we might agree in wanting to see consumers be more proactive in procuring their food, attempting to drive change with a word rather than with a process doesn't sit well in farmers' market communities.

Among many of the producers I met, there was an initial sensitivity that the consumer doesn't have the right to be called a co-producer. Producers work extremely hard for the title, facing long hours and difficult physical work, often in relative isolation. The consumer, by contrast, simply strolls into a market, plunks down their cash, and buys the stuff. At the same time, most producers highly value feedback on products and active engagement in the buying process. One producer said that such consumers are the best test market in the world. While shunning the word, producers are clearly not opposed to the concept of co-producers and stand to benefit from a high degree of interaction.

On the consumer side there is the reality that, however thoughtful, educated and dedicated to learning and trusting the origins of their food some consumers are, others just aren't ever going to be. They want to swing freely at one end of the food chain, rather than be a link within it. They don't want to give feedback; they want to buy a commodity and go away. Those of us closely tied to the food world need to realize that for many eaters, thinking about where their food comes from is undesirable, too complicated, too irrelevant or possibly even painful. Of course we want to reverse that, but putting pressure on such consumers (“Be a co-producer, you!”) can just as easily drive them off.

In marketing, consumers are graded into various segments which predict behaviors based on individuals' life-styles, attitudes, and experiences. On the consumer to co-producer

spectrum numerous sub-segments would exist, which individuals migrate through as their needs and attitudes change. One problem with the co-producer discourse is that consumer and co-producer get drawn in black and white, but there is no magic switch that makes one into the other. Food consumers are just like any consumers, and their behaviors change based on complex combinations of factors.

The effort, then, of farmers' markets or of Slow Food or of any of us food-concerned individuals, is to create incremental growth. We want to move people along that spectrum, a few steps at a time, toward more responsibility and more consciousness about food choices. We also need to recognize that no one driver will move a consumer all the way from A to Z, perhaps not even over the course of a lifetime. From F to H may have to be good enough.

Incremental change isn't very glamorous. The idea that Jane Consumer may not change her name to Jane Co-Producer before she heads off to the great produce stand in the sky may seem a little gloomy. But when we add up Jane's and Helmut's and Serena's segmental shifts along the consumer spectrum, those collective increments become very valuable. It's not about a hundred people changing from thoughtless consumer to informed co-producer, it's about a million people changing a little and becoming a little more responsible. The net value is greater, and more importantly, a lot of people changing to a small degree is much more likely to happen than a few people changing a lot.

Within a marketplace, producers and consumers work in symbiosis to evolve each other simultaneously. Facilitating the flow of communication within that space helps breed a better consumer, something closer to a co-producer. Better consumers ask more of their producers, in terms of quality, information and trust, and responsive producers result in a stronger marketplace.

If there is, in fact, such a thing as a co-producer, then perhaps it is the alliance of day-to-day food shoppers and a broader group of other customers such as restaurateurs and regional officials. Together, they not only provide feedback on what kind of beets and apples to grow, but also how producers can best serve and be served by their communities. And whether it's at Porta Palazzo in Turin, the Adelaide Showground Farmers' Market, or a fruit stand in Beverly Hills, surely that's a picture we can all take pride in helping to produce.