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## Food, health and society: the town meets the countryside

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### Introduction

It is not long time that food culture has undertaken a process of renewal started when severe food safety problems did reveal through the “food scandals”: the so called *mad cow disease* (BSE, Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) or the *swine flu and bird flu*, and other various contaminations occurred in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first development in food culture, so long, was due to safety needs but was the beginning of a new consciousness about the importance of food and diet on human health.

Quickly, the demand for quality food oriented itself towards qualitative – local, traditional, organic – food features. This was a great challenge and a new opportunity for agriculture: to supply valuable goods and new services, to a wide range of consumers, searching for local, ecological, ethical, healthy requisites, from food and country.

In the meanwhile a new sensibility has grown referring to urban life quality, due to overcrowded cities that hardly supply the needed services and suffer for the loosening of the contact with the environment as well as with the countryside.

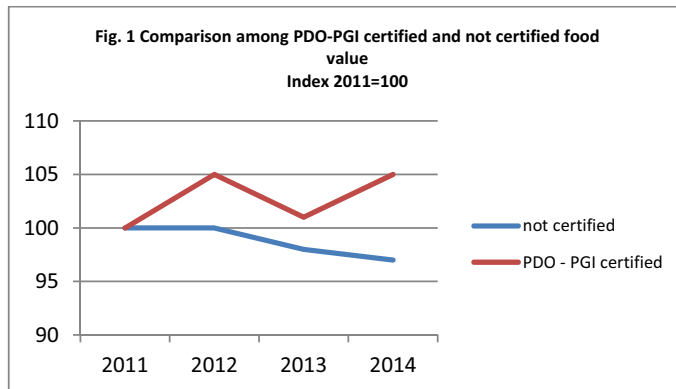
In this context, food has become, in a wide sense, the mean by which the territory is supplied inside the town: a food that must be evocative of nature and history, healthy and correlated with the share of social values.

### Quality in food sector

In the consumeristic economy, access to food is regulated by market competition, a way that allows to allocate goods in quantity but fails in allocating their quality. At the same time the *non-price goods*, like environmental goods, are not regulated by market, once nobody has to pay for them; this results in waste of ecological resources due to disregarding the cost of their reproduction, because: *in the long run we are all dead* (J. M. Keynes in “A Tract on Monetary Reform”, cap. 3, 1923).

One of the strongest engines of the economy has ever been the increase in consumption linked to rising income and population growth. Driven by rising economy and population, the food market as

always been a growing market. In the last years, for the first time, a decrease in food consumption has been registered in developed countries as a result of economic recession and demographic stability. In this context agriculture has had to pursue better economic results no longer through higher efficiency and returns to scale but through an enhanced quality, able to meet an higher willingness to pay of the consumers for typical and healthy food (Cantarelli, 2005). For example, in Italy from 2011 to 2014 the value of PDO or PGI certified food is risen by 5%, in the meanwhile not certified food is fallen by 3% (Fig. 1).



Source: processing of ISMEA data, Qualivita report.

Moreover, the demand for quality has been boosted by the need to ensure food safety, following the remembered contamination events, but is now related with healthy diets too; according with a new consciousness of the role food plays in causing metabolic diseases because of overeating or when poor in quality. The safe and healthy diet is therefore a demanded need of consumers and also a public good because of the need to prevent public health costs and losses in human capital.

The market demand for quality food is therefore driven by the search for: health, environment, landscape, culture, ethic values but also agriculture and gastronomy specificities.

Through the use and the sharing of goods with such characteristics, the *user* wants to tell the others his own view of life; food is the mean to express oneself. So that, if in the market economy, man is defined for his economic function of *consumer*, the post-modern vision defines him as a *consum-actor*, meaning that he pursue the aim to play an active role, conscious and oriented to relations, in his purchase of goods and services (touristic, relational, healthy, etc...) (Viganò et al. 2015).

The meaning of the term “quality” has deeply changed in time: at the beginning of the twentieth century (during the tayloristic period), it was only a technic able to statistically measure the defects; nowadays, quality, is intended to be a way to conceive the social relations. Quality is a *shared*

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