

# **Eating Local: a Philosophical Toolbox**

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## *Abstract*

Eating local food has become a mainstream proxy for virtue and a reliable model of sustainable dieting. It suffers, nonetheless, from genuine criticisms and limitations. In this paper we suggest theoretical amendments to reorient the local food movement and turn *eating local* into a robust concept—comprehensive, coherent, and inclusive, affording a firm grip over structural aspects of the food chain. We develop our argument in three parts. The first contends that “local” can be said of lots of entities (e.g., whole or multi-ingredient foods, recipes, menus) and that its meaning varies depending on which entities are under consideration. The second examines three dimensions of being local: the distance from the place of production; the geographical origins; the social links to consumers and producers. The third presents our robust conception of eating local, grounded on a more realistic model that accommodates for heterogeneous and complex communities.

*Keywords:* food ontology, food identity, food ethics, local food, locavorism

The idiom “eating local,” as found within the concepts of *local food* and *locavore* diet, has by now become mainstream<sup>1</sup> (Kim & Huang 2021). Nonetheless, these terms are still far from clear in public discourses<sup>2</sup> as well as in the works of scholars. Even simple questions can

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<sup>1</sup> “The explosion of interest in food traditions and the consumption of locally produced foods promise to significantly alter how we eat. Sometimes called locavorism, the heritage movement, or farm-to-table cuisine, the Slow Food movement has transcended its roots in Italy and is now a global phenomenon. In the United States, locavorism is now mainstream thanks to chefs such as Alice Waters, the writings of Michael Pollan, and Michelle Obama’s campaign to bring fresh ingredients and minimally processed food to school cafeterias.” (Furrow 2016: 40).

<sup>2</sup> An essay of the conceptual intricacies that lay consumers must face on a daily basis is provided by Jalonik, M. C. (2011) *Locally Grown? It All Depends on How You Define It* (Phys.org, 2 April 2011), <<https://phys.org/news/2011-04-locally-grown.html>> accessed 3 June 2021.

raise doubts over their meaning and cast uncertainty on what is required of a well-intentioned producer or consumer. For instance, if a food originates right next to the place of consumption, does it make a difference to its localness whether it is produced by a small-scale or by an industrial farm? Or, if a food is purchased directly from a trusted small-scale grower, but consumed at home after a one-hour drive, is it still local? If that same food is distributed in a generic grocery store down the road from the field, would it be more or less local than the food purchased by the traveler who took it home by car?

Questions like these extend to nearly any conceptual aspect of eating local. Collectively taken, they quickly scale up to insinuate fundamental criticisms of the local food movement, which risk jeopardizing its credibility.<sup>3</sup> What have people been talking about for the past five decades, when they praised and demanded more “local food”? Have their claims and requests been shifting? Even if unintentionally, may the current local food movement back values that stand in opposition to those of authentic local farmers, favoring a new wave of privileged producers and consumers?<sup>4</sup>

We see these worries as genuine and in this paper we propose an answer to them. The approach we use to respond to these questions is fundamentally conceptual and builds upon the resources and methods of analytic ontology, metaphysics, and so-called conceptual engineering.<sup>5</sup> We argue that, if eating local is to be of any use in shaping positive scenarios for the future of food, we should turn it into a *robust concept*. Drawing from literature in

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<sup>3</sup> See an example of early criticism to the movement in Budiansky, S. (2010) *Math Lessons for Locavores* (New York Times, 19 August 2010), <[https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/20/opinion/20budiansky.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/20/opinion/20budiansky.html?_r=0)> accessed 3 June 2021.

<sup>4</sup> While we do not pursue this line of inquiry in the paper, our analysis suggests that the concepts of local food and authentic food need not always go hand in hand. Thus, it is perfectly in keeping that a local product be not regarded as authentic within the community that produces it. We are indebted to an anonymous referee for bringing this point to our attention.

<sup>5</sup> Conceptual engineering aims at analyzing, revising, and amending defective concepts in order to reach specific ethical, political, or epistemic goals, see Cappelen, Burgess, & Plunkett (2020). Attempts to reengineer concepts have taken place in different fields, from sex and gender (e.g., Haslanger 2012), to race (e.g., Spencer 2019) and disability (e.g., Barnes 2016). For a recent example connected to food, see Borghini, Piras & Serini (ms.1). While the present inquiry significantly overlaps and draws inspiration from recent philosophical works on conceptual engineering, it also pays debt to other formal and informal approaches to metaphysics and ontology, for instance those illustrated in Varzi (2019).

philosophy of science,<sup>6</sup> we use this expression in a technical sense, to connote a concept that is comprehensive (i.e., it considers all relevant scenarios), coherent (i.e., it delivers a position that is free of inconsistencies), and inclusive (i.e., it takes into account the composite nature of the relationship between food, place, and identity). Only a robust concept can afford a firm grip over structural aspects of the food chain, so that producers and consumers will trust and use it meaningfully.

In the sequel, we begin by articulating relevant interpretations of locavorism and laying out the basis for our argument (§1), which we then present in three parts. The first part contends that “local” can be said of a lot of entities (e.g., whole foods, multi-ingredient foods, and recipes) and we study how its meaning varies depending on which food is under consideration (§2). The second part examines three dimensions of being local: the distance from the place of production; the geographical origins; the social links to consumers and producers (§3). The third part sums up our robust conception of eating local, which situates it within a more and better articulated model (§4). The amendments we suggest serve to reorient the local food movement, but with stakes: by situating eating local within an improved model, which is sensitive to the ontological entanglements of food as well as to the cultural heterogeneity and complexity of communities, they demand a radical revision of current takes on locavorism.

## **§1 Local Food and Local Food Movements**

There is no analogous concept to *local food* and *locavore diet* in the history of dieting and nutrition, where the exotic and the faraway were most often praised. In fact, in the distant past, the recognition of a food as local emerged primarily within commercial settings, where a sense of place and otherness became salient. Capatti and Montanari (2003: xiv) well capture this point:

[I]dentity may also—and perhaps primarily—be defined as difference, that is, difference in relation to others. In the case of gastronomy, one thing is quite clear: “local” identity is created as a function of exchange, at the moment when (and to the degree that) a product

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Eronen (2015).

or recipe is brought into contact with different systems and cultures [...] Mortadella from Bologna is called “Bologna” only when it leaves the city where it is produced .

Nowadays, buying and eating what is considered local has become a proxy for virtue (Hinrichs 2003), and popular authors (Nabhan 2002), as well as renowned chefs (Bertolli & Waters 1995), and scholars (Noll 2013), regard it as a reliable model for sustainable diets. As part of a broader cohort of alternative movements (see, for instance, Sebo 2018), the one for local food advocates for a supply chain independent from the global agribusiness (Sandler 2015: 31), ideally realized through networks that are socially cohesive and collaborative (Feenstra 2014). The most common arguments for eating local—discussed at length in the literature—rest on ethical grounds, chiefly on environmental and on socio-political claims and, oftentimes, on health claims too (Peterson 2013; de Bres 2016; Ferguson & Thompson 2021; Young 2021).

From an environmental perspective, *food miles*, along with *zero km food*, work as measures for the sustainability of diets by signaling their smaller carbon footprint. From a socio-political perspective, instead, eating habits based on local food are regarded as beneficial for the well-being of a community. In fact, they help recirculate capital by supporting small farmers, nudging them towards non-invasive agriculture, and by reducing social distance between producers and consumers; also, they afford greater control over production and prices, thus working towards the achievement of food sovereignty (Sander 2015; Feenstra 2014; McWilliams 2010). Finally, diets based on local food offer an advantage from a public health perspective, because they increase access to fresh, well-controlled produce.

Eating local can be argued for based on two additional types of grounds. From an epistemic point of view, promoting local food *enhances transparency and trust* in the supply chain at a time when people are losing knowledge of their food (Werkheiser & Noll 2013; Epting 2020). Moreover, the literature suggests two arguments resting on aesthetic grounds. First, local food *tastes better* because it is grown for its flavor more than for its yield (e.g., Petrini 2001; Singer and Mason 2007; Spiller 2012; Bratanova et al. 2015). Secondly, it

facilitates an *aesthetic engagement* with the environment, as local edible entities are constitutive of immersive experiences and therefore have value *per se* (e.g., Adams 2018).

Nonetheless, the local food movements have been subject to important criticisms. Most notably, the data produced to support them were found to be imprecise and partisan, if not flawed. Take for instance a *food mile*, which is arguably central to many interpretations of eating local: this concept seems a problematic abstraction because it is impossible to decline it at a “more geographically specific scale” and is therefore unavoidably fussy (Schnell 2013: 216). Other lines of criticism point at the quality and types of data, contending that they focus on a scale that is too narrow and discount the fact that the benefits and burdens of food production are heavily dependent on the environmental, social, and economic conditions (Cope 2014: 1352; Sandler 2015: 7; Scharber & Dancs 2016; de Bres 2016).

Other authors advanced ethical and political reasons for undermining the principles behind diets based on local food. Navin (2014), for instance, entertains the claim that locavorism is ultimately detrimental to producers (and their communities) living in less affluent regions of the world that depend upon international food trade for their economies, such as producers of specialty coffee, vanilla beans, cinnamon, or rice. Another line of criticism charges local food movements for failing to fulfill the promise of a radical dietary change, or for misrepresenting themselves as more reformist than what they in fact are, so much so that the locavore proposition has reduced itself to a brand (Werkheiser & Noll 2013; McWilliams 2010; DeLind 2010). A further criticism emerging from our argument in this paper, finally, rests on the conviction that the current theoretical framework implicitly backing local movements cannot take into account the multi-ethnic, personalized, and intricate link that exist between food, place, and (individual or collective) identity.

While these criticisms may expose specific issues emerging from privileging local food, they forgo one additional consideration that seems crucial. There is no *single* local food movement. “Local food” is an *umbrella term* that covers heterogeneous projects (Schnell 2013: 621). As Werkheiser and Noll (2013) point out, different definitions of food, people, and locality coexist. Three (sub)movements emerge from their analysis, each of which comes with its own strengths and weaknesses. First, the *community-focused* movement, which sees

food as constitutive of social groups, and locality as a driver for just relationships. Second, the *system-focused* movement, which targets change at the policy level and sees food as a necessary good, is embedded in institutions and impacted by large systems. Third, the *individual-focused* movement, which is the actual face of the local food movement as presented to the large public: here local food is seen as a “consumptive product” that can be found even on the shelves of stores that rely upon large-scale distribution. Much of the strong backlash against the idea of eating local probably targets this third movement. The prototypical image evoked by local food skeptics portrays an economically comfortable, neo-liberal locavore who shops at a farmers’ market in a gentrifying neighborhood. Here, locavorism ends up being a practice primarily reinforcing social distinction under generic pretenses of environmental and social concerns.<sup>7</sup>

Recognizing different strains of the local food movement is important as much as it is acknowledging the limitations that each of them faces. Should we then conclude that “local food” is meaningless—a death sentence for those concepts guilty of signifying too many disparate things? Far from accepting this finale, we still believe that there is a way to turn local food into a *robust* concept, which is comprehensive, coherent, and inclusive. Our solution, however, comes at a cost: we need to embark on a thorough reorientation of the conceptual foundations of the local food vision.<sup>8</sup> In fact, being tied to a place affects the identity of food in complex and important ways, which depend on the ontological specificities of the entities under consideration and which have gone so far unnoticed in the literature and public discourses. In the coming sections, thus, we offer a philosophical toolbox in regard to eating local under a new light.

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<sup>7</sup> For some more or less recent examples of online articles pointing in this direction, see Maltz Bovy, P. (2015) *Food Snobs Like Mark Bittman Aren't Even Hiding Their Elitism Anymore* (The New Republic, 25 March 2015, <<https://newrepublic.com/article/121374/foodie-elitism-are-mark-bittman-and-michael-pollan-elitist>> accessed 3 June 2021; A Growing Culture (2021) *Local Food Movement Won't Save the World* (Resilience, 8 February 2021, <<https://www.resilience.org/stories/2021-02-08/local-food-movements-wont-save-the-world/>> accessed 3 June 2021. For another recent study regarding the metropolitan area of Barcelona, see Garcia, Garcia-Sierra, & Domene (2020).

<sup>8</sup> We follow here an approach similar to the one adopted in Borghini, Piras, & Serini (2020b).

## §2. What Is Local?

If it is true that when we eat we are always confronted with choices—negotiations among different values embedded in the food or that we achieve through our consumption—then local food, with its wide appeal to values (social, environmental, aesthetic, etc.), is likely a more complex concept than we presume. What exactly is said to be local? As it is inaccurate to attribute to local eaters, activists, locavorists, and mindless foodies the same dietary ethical commitments, it is equally of little explanatory value to lump together *anything food* into one generic category that we may regard as either local or non-local on the basis of one standard of measurement. Thus, the same criticism exposed by Schnell (2013), namely that calculating locality through the abstract figure of the “average item of food” and its travels is too simplistic, can be easily applied to many other dimensions of the idea of locality.

The discussion on local food by and large overlooks the nature of our edible environment. This is a variegated landscape, crowded with edible entities far more complex than those available at a farmers’ market. It includes, among others, ingredients, recipes, menus, processes, habits, ways of consumption, and diets. Henceforth we shall refer to these sorts of entities as *food entities*. Each of them comes with its own identity criteria but, at the same time, we often find them intertwined with each other. They can be so much interwoven that it is impossible to set them apart. Take for instance a whole food, say, a bunch of cabbages, that is regarded as local. This can have a bearing over recipes we could make with such cabbages (e.g. stir-fried, as filling or side dish) or even over ways of consumption (e.g. having an Hiroshima-style okonomiyaki during a trip in Japan).

In what ways local cabbages are linked to local recipes involving cabbages, local ways of consuming cabbages, or local menus? To address these and cognate questions we need to look at local food through the lenses of the so-called *food ontology*.<sup>9</sup> This branch of philosophy addresses questions related to the definition of food, its basic relations and properties, the links it bears to language and social practices as well as to the natural world.

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<sup>9</sup> Food ontology is a relatively brand new field of inquiry. For some further considerations on it, see Kaplan (2019: 11-37); Borghini, Piras & Serini (2020a); Borghini & Piras (2021). For an example of formal food ontology, see Dooley et al. (2018).

Drawing on this research field, we illustrate some of the most salient kinds of entities that can be regarded as “local” one at a time.

*Local whole food.* This is the quintessential local food, with a short supply chain. It is grown in a private or community garden, bought directly on the farm, or at a market nearby it. But, a whole food can be processed too, and this introduces a diverse number of places into the picture. A good case in point is a cut of meat, such as a ribeye steak. In this case, we have multiple sites possibly associated with the steak, including the fields where the cow grazed, the barn(s), the slaughterhouse, and the market. Analogous considerations could be brought forth for other products such as flour, sugar, and coffee.<sup>10</sup>

*Local ingredients.* In addition to whole foods, diets include many multi-ingredient foods. Some multi-ingredient foods may be composed only of whole foods, e.g. a salad of beans, onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, and basil; others, instead, are composed of a mix of whole and non-whole foods, e.g. a pancake. Ingredients highlight in a simple way some of the complexity linking food and place, which is often discounted by local food discourse.

Three main problems emerge from an analysis of such complexity. *First*, multi-ingredient foods pose a *problem of proliferation of places*; thus, items as simple as a garden salad, a loaf of bread, or a cookie may come to be associated with as many locations as the number of their ingredients. *Second*, multi-ingredient foods raise the *problem of selectivity*. Does each ingredient contribute to the locality of the food in an equal manner? Should only some ingredients be relevant when it comes to locavorism and why? In other words, a multi-ingredient food may count as local even when some of its ingredients are not at all local as, for instance, in the case of a boiled potato grown in a community garden and dressed with generic salt and pepper. *Third*, multi-ingredient foods reveal a *problem of independence*: it seems entirely fitting to claim that in some contexts multi-ingredient food is local, independently of whether some of its ingredients are. A nice case in point is illustrated by

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<sup>10</sup> As highlighted by Weiss (2012), food may count as whole when it instantiates a spatial, social, ecological, and culinary unification. For instance, even the jowl of a pig can be regarded as a whole food because the parts are embedded in a “series of connections at once anatomical, agricultural, sociological, and culinary” (Weiss 2012: 621). In a parallel fashion, vegetables partially covered in dirt and bearing traces of the soil wherein they grew, can be regarded as *ur*-whole foods—they are whole foods that in addition enable access to the totality of relations that bore them to the market.



chocolate from Modica, a multi-ingredient food associated with a small Sicilian town, which can be made entirely from imported goods (cocoa, sugar, ginger, vanilla) and is nonetheless not only regarded as typical but is also protected as a geographical indication (Borghini 2014).<sup>11</sup>

The problems of proliferation, selectivity and independence, emerge even more vividly when we start considering other categories of food entities that can be associated with a place. Here below we survey recipes, menus, and diets.

*Local recipes.* Recipes bring into the picture not simply foods made out of multiple ingredients, but also codified procedures, tools, and skills that are constitutively linked to the identity of food; furthermore, recipes are in some sense more abstract than the dishes that exemplify them, so that the same recipe may be exemplified by dishes that are quite different in terms of taste, ingredients, size, and so on.<sup>12</sup> For these reasons, recipes significantly expand the problems of proliferation, selectivity, and independence. What counts as local in a recipe? The ingredients? The method of production? The cook? The place of production or consumption? Or a selection of any of these?

We may turn to the history and theory of food to start addressing these questions. For some products, we may draw on geographical indications, where the identity of local food is defined through precise geographical boundaries fixed by recognized institutions (cf. Giovannucci *et al.* 2009). And yet, the constituents of recipes for geographical indications (namely people, tools, procedures, ingredients, and so on) travel and some argue that, in certain instances, a geographical indication could be successfully made in multiple places or places distant from the original one: many kinds of cheese offer good cases in point here, including Halloumi and Gruyère (cf. Paxson 2010).

An added layer of independence between food, its constitutive elements, and locality comes from the possibility of a recipe that is (very) loosely tied to a place. For instance,

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<sup>11</sup> The disciplinary of production of Cioccolato di Modica can be accessed here <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1525701944123&uri=CELEX%3A52018XC0507%2804%29>>.

<sup>12</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of the ontological issues related to recipes see Borghini (2010; 2015; 2021) and Floyd and Forster (2003) for a comprehensive history of the concept across different cultures.

recipes such as Neapolitan pizza, jambalaya, General Tso chicken,<sup>13</sup> French fries are all tied in a *sui generis* manner to a real or mythical place and one is left wondering to what extent they do and should influence a locavore diet.

*Local menus.* A menu is a sample of recipes, which serves to guide diners (e.g. in a restaurant) and is typically structured according to a meal. A menu need not be written, but can also be orally recited or illustrated. In a menu, recipes can be named, described, or represented through the use of a variety of media. What makes a menu local? The core ingredients of the food it highlights? The recipes featured in it? The structure of the meal that it implicitly suggests? The ways of consumption that are explicitly or implicitly represented in it (e.g. buffet-style, all-you-can-eat, a lazy Susan table)? To what extent does the arrangement of the menu (e.g. the language or the media of representing recipes) influence its linkage to a place (Chau 2014)?

*Local diets.* A diet can be understood as a regimented food style within a more general lifestyle (Kaplan 2019). A diet does not just list the elements that should be eaten, but also how, how much, and in what relations to each other. Sometimes a diet may be regarded as local based on the selection of whole foods, multi-ingredient foods, or recipes, e.g., steaming rice everyday, dipping a cookie into a cup of tea, and so on. In other cases the local aspects of a diet are longer temporal patterns, which become associated with more or less specific places: for example, a bowl of beef noodle may be associated with breakfast in Lanzhou, China, while a dinner of lobster at 5.00 p.m. with Portland, Maine, and a Chicken Afritada for lunch with Manila, Philippines.<sup>14</sup> Given their comprehensive nature, diets are the pinnacle of the complex ways in which the link between food and place can be realized. What makes a diet a *local food-based* diet? To what extent can such a diet be combined with other kinds of diets?

The examination of local diets brings to light another rich and relevant aspect of our topic. Eating local is intimately connected to the ways in which individuals, communities,

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<sup>13</sup> The recipe name is spelled out (and pronounced) in multiple forms; see Ian Cheney's documentary *The Search for General Tso* (2014).

<sup>14</sup> For a comparative study on the frequency and the temporality of meals, see Chiva (1997).

and collectivities shape, narrate, imagine, or negotiate their identities (see Feagan 2007). For instance, dining can be a metaphor for traveling (Heldke 2003), for locating ourselves socially in other spaces, or it can bring us ‘home’ no matter where and with whom we are—think of the final supper prepared by Babette in the movie *Babette’s Feast*, which offers her the occasion to reenact her life in Paris. Thus, an inclusive concept of locality should be able to accommodate different ways to bring together food, place, and identity through individual and communal narratives.

Let us take stock. We have examined a few of the kinds of food entities that food ontologies countenance and we have discussed the specific questions that each of them poses. A well-rounded understanding of eating local would face additional specific questions concerning also, among others, the *taste* of place (Trubek 2008), local *processes* (e.g. charcuterie or artisanal cheeses; cf. Paxson 2013), local *cultural systems* (Werkheiser & Noll 2014; 2018), and local *spaces and places of consumption* (e.g., see Beriss & Sutton 2007 for an ethnographic study on restaurants; Agyeman, Matthews, & Sobel 2017 for a research on food trucks). However, we see no reason to delve into additional specific questions here. What we have seen so far suffices to highlight a weakness of present discourses about local food and to indicate that, to turn it into a robust concept, we should comprehend in it different sorts of food entities in their relationship to locality and be inclusive of the ways they insert into individual and collective narratives.

We pinpointed three theoretical problems for local food (proliferation, selectivity, and independence) and we have shown that they become increasingly significant as we consider more kinds of food entities. These problems urge an unnoticed conceptual distinction. In fact, we should pull apart *single-placed* and *multi-placed* versions of local food. In single-placed conceptions, individual or collective narratives associate each (kind of) food entity with one place. For instance, a resident of Sassari, Sardinia, would aspire to buy whole foods, to prepare multi-ingredient foods, to cook recipes, and follow menus and a diet that they associate with Logudoro, the region surrounding Sassari. In multi-placed conceptions, individual or collective narratives associate each (kind of) food entity with multiple places. For instance, a resident of Sassari would aspire to buy whole foods and multi-ingredient

foods from Logudoro, to cook recipes from the Berber region of Tunisia, and to follow a Mediterranean diet.<sup>15</sup> We shall put to use the distinction between single- and multi-placed conceptions of local food in our discussion in §4.

What emerges from our survey of the interplay between food ontologies and locality is that local food is by now far from being a robust concept and that, to turn it into one such, locavores should make up their mind for a host of scenarios associated with food and place. If eating local is simply to purchase certain whole foods, we leave out of the picture a great part of the human relationship to food and the multiple levels within which our diets can be entrenched with narratives regarding food, place, and identity.

Sorting out the ontological entanglements of food items is only a part of the theoretical work needed to specify a robust concept of locavorism. In the next section, we study the dimensions through which such concepts can be developed and that would enable us to fully devise a comprehensive and inclusive concept. Only then (§4) we return to consider the ethical and political dimensions of local food, which can be coherently integrated with the theoretical analysis of §2 and §3.

### **§3. Being Local**

In this section, we study the spatial and social dimensions through which we can qualitatively or quantitatively assess locality. This analysis intersects with the one provided in the previous section, devoted to the food entities that can be regarded as local, and will serve as a basis to deliver a more robust theoretical account of eating local.

It may seem a truism that “to be local” is a geographical attribution of a food. However, the term trades on a sort of ambiguity between an absolute and a relative understanding of the attribution. Champagne is a celebrated local food because of its unique place of origin; its locality does not vary based on where and when we consume it.<sup>16</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> This example is inspired by actual acquaintances of the authors. For analogous cases featured in the news, see for instance the case analyzed in Huang (2020) as well as Hesson, T. (2015) *Planting Exotic Crops for the Sake of the Local Economy* (The Atlantic, 12 July 2015) <<https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/07/immigrant-refugees-farm-food-from-home/398237/>> accessed 3 June 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Of course this is the outcome of a long term process of social construction of the product Champagne; see Guy (2003).

tomato from a small Hudson Valley farm delivered to a home in the heart of Manhattan,<sup>17</sup> instead, counts as local in virtue of the relative distance between farm and market. In §3.1 and §3.2 we study these two spatial dimensions of local food, exposing their shortcomings.

However, these geographical understandings do not capture all intended dimensions of locality. In fact, several authors (e.g., Desrochers & Shimizu 2012) argued that they rest on a misinterpretation of the intended concept. A neat exemplification of this issue is the sake brewery located in Holbrook, Arizona, which makes available to customers of restaurants in the surrounding area (e.g. in Flagstaff) the traditional Japanese beverage. On the face of the geographical distance, the sake may arguably be regarded as local based on the social environment of the store, the short and transparent supply chain linking producer, seller, and consumer, and the significance of the food to a customer's personal and collective identity.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, the aim of locavore diets should be to shorten the social distance between producers and consumers, and not the geographical distance between field and table.<sup>19</sup> This is the social dimension of local food, which we examine in §3.3.

### **§3.1 Spatial Dimensions: Absolute and Relative**

Consider the following two statements:

(1) This buffalo mozzarella I'm eating in Melbourne, Australia, is local insofar as it is produced a few miles from here.

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<sup>17</sup> For an example, see Ong, B. (2020) *Local Farms Are Delivering Fresh Produce to New Yorkers' Doorsteps* (TimeOut, 1 April 2020), <<https://www.timeout.com/newyork/news/local-farms-are-delivering-fresh-produce-to-new-yorkers-doorsteps-040120>> accessed 3 June 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Granillo, A. (2019) *Brewing In The Desert: Sake Finds An Unlikely Home In Arizona* (National Public Radio, 27 January 2019) <<https://www.npr.org/2019/01/27/688211071/brewing-in-the-desert-sake-finds-an-unlikely-home-in-arizona>> accessed 3 June 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Some organizations promoting local food go as far as proposing subscriptions to monthly or weekly boxes filled with "local" produce shipped from different regions of the world while highlighting the relative social importance of those products. See, for instance, <<http://www.micatuca.com>>.

(2) This buffalo mozzarella I'm eating in Melbourne, Australia, is local insofar as it is produced in Avellino, Italy.

The statements are emblematic consequences of two quite different principles, which often guide discourses about local food and that are based, respectively, on relative and absolute geographical distance.<sup>20</sup>

*Relative Spatial Locality Principle:* a food is local if and only if there is sufficiently close spatial proximity between the place of consumption and the place of production. This is the principle grounding statement (1). The predicate “to be local” is synonymous with “produced at less than  $x$  miles,” the so-called food miles. As it turns out, each region possibly yields its local food, which keeps being local as long as its consumption is local as well. Food stops being local once it crosses the region's borders. This model of understanding local food by and large serves as the conceptual backdrop for the locavore movement in the United States (McWilliams 2010: 29–33), in particular, what Noll and Werkheiser call the “individual-focused (sub)movement” (see §1), though it can be mitigated by some social requirements (as we discuss in §3.3).

*Absolute Spatial Locality Principle:* a food is local if and only if the place of production has certain characteristics that single it out and make it typical, regardless of where it is consumed. This is the principle grounding statement (2) and implicitly evoked in Capatti and Montanari's passage provided in §1. It holds true especially for geographical indications (e.g. Mezcal, Doi Tung coffee, Basmati rice) and for typical products (e.g. kimchi, bouillabaisse, tajine), in particular in the European Union (cf. Holt & Amilien 2007).

For instance, when stakeholders in the Parmigiano Reggiano consortium contend that their produce is local whereas the Wisconsin Parmesan is not, they are not referring to the place where the product is consumed, but rather to the relation that the product bears to the place of production. The implicitly invoked Absolute principle, here, regards “local” as a value term suggesting that the food in question has an *original* place where it belongs, the

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<sup>20</sup> As highlighted by Avieli (2016: 134), this ambiguity is featured in the resolution H.R.2419 passed by the U.S. Congress, which endorses at the same time both views by claiming that a local food is whatever product that either refers to its origin or is marketed at less than 400 miles of distance from its origin.

sole place where it can be authentically realized (cf. Nowak 2019). This is the place of *terroir*, where specific communities of humans have long-standing relationships with a specific morphological conformation and composition of the soil, specific flora and fauna, and a specific climate (Trubek 2008: 18–53; Parasecoli 2019: 75–83). *Terroir*, in the narratives of those who hold an Absolute principle, justifies a unique connotation of place (Johnston & Bauman 2015: 65–7).

The Relative and Absolute principles are often invoked simultaneously by opposed stakeholders;<sup>21</sup> but, they can be jointly endorsed too. For instance, a resident of Kingston, Jamaica may consume Blue Mountain Coffee produced in the nearby plantations, thus fulfilling both principles at once. However, other times the principles may come into conflict; in these cases, a commitment to eating local implies a hard choice between the two. According to the Relative principle, for instance, a buffalo mozzarella from Avellino in Melbourne cannot be a local food, contrary to what is countenanced by the Absolute principle. According to the Relative principle, instead, a buffalo Mozzarella produced few miles from Melbourne and eaten in Melbourne is a local food regardless of how it was produced, while the Absolute principle may regard that mozzarella as non-local if it is not the expression of a specific *terroir* and lacks authentic character. Without further reasons, each of the principles seems to be insufficient to guide an agent who aims to eat locally. Thus, the spatial dimensions of locality, when considered in isolation, are far from fulfilling the theoretical desiderata of a robust concept of local food. Besides this important and general shortcoming, the spatial dimensions of locality suffer from specific criticisms, which substantially undermine their feasibility as conceptual guides to eating local. We survey these criticisms next.

### **§3.2 The Limits of the Spatial Conceptions**

In this section, we begin by considering four criticisms addressed to the Relative principle, and then move to show five criticisms for the Absolute principle. The first criticism for the

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<sup>21</sup> For example, Bonotti (2018) examines the specific tensions that often arise between competing stakeholders, one of which invokes a conception of locality based on the place of production while the other calls on a conception of locality based on cultural link to a place.

Relative principle regards the practical and theoretical difficulties in fixing the cut-off point between local and non-local regions. As of today, no clear-cut and univocal norms for fixing it have been devised. To illustrate the difficulty, we may survey two examples. Suppose that limiting carbon emissions is the core reason for “going local.” As Navin (2014) points out, it is clear that sometimes growing a plant nearby is more polluting than growing it far away and then transporting it. Thus, for instance, growing tomatoes in a greenhouse just outside Dublin produces more CO<sub>2</sub> emissions than transporting the tomatoes to Dublin from southern Spain. Likewise, swarms of cars heading for a local farm just a few miles away for buying local products emit more CO<sub>2</sub> than a single means of transport from many more miles away. How should one draw the boundary? If instead of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, locality would rest on the freshness of produce, other issues would arise. Freshness varies based on the characteristics of each food and the context within which it is managed, which also includes subjective preferences and experiences. So, we would have different cut-off points between local and non-local and the Relative principle would implicitly turn out to be a multi-placed conception of locality.

A second criticism of the Relative principle of locality concerns the *public justification* of the cut-off point. One may argue that this principle is misleadingly objective, in that it seems to rely on an idea of space as a quantifiable and measurable geographical distance (Kula 1986; Farinelli 2016). On the face of it, it cannot be taken for granted that consumers and producers equally experience the distances between the place of production and the market. In fact, we may speculate that producers and consumers sometimes have asymmetrical experiences of space. Thus, different means of transportation could make, say, relatively simple for consumers to fulfill their needs, but relatively hard for the producers to sell their goods; in this case, the same food is perceived as local from the consumer’s end, but not from the producer’s end.

A third criticism of the Relative principle points to the complex geographical nature of many plants and animals we consume. A neat case in point is provided by the intricate story of wine production within Europe, which makes for some challenging metaphysical and ontological conundrums (Borghini 2012). During the 19th century, the *Phylloxera vastatrix*



decimated the vineyards across the European continent. To try and address the issue, the “local” grapevines of *Vitis vinifera* were uprooted and replaced with their “American” counterparts of *Vitis labrusca*, on which clones of *Vitis vinifera* were grafted (Millon 2013: 42–46). To these days, most vineyards in typical winegrowing regions are chimeras of these two species, where clones of some local variety of *Vitis vinifera* are grafted onto *Vitis labrusca* roots. What fixes the locality of a grape? The phylogenetic history of the plants it involves? Their ontogenetic trajectories? What if the clones of a variety of *Vitis vinifera* were initially nursed hundreds of miles away from the farm before being sold to the farmer and then grafted onto the *Vitis labrusca* roots? After how many years do these clones become local (parts of) plants?

Finally, a fourth criticism follows straight from the considerations offered in §2 regarding multi-ingredient foods, recipes, menus, and diets. As the problems of selectivity and independence highlighted, the Relative principle would fall short of accommodating all those recipes that draw on a relationship between food, place, and identity that is not literal. For instance, to account for the local character of a Pakistani grill in Manhattan (see Krishnendu 2016: 31–61), it is not sufficient to point out the nearby sourcing of selected ingredients, but one needs also to refer to the recipes, the structure of the menu, and so on. As also McWilliams (2010) and Navin (2015) argue, reasoning only in terms of food miles leaves out identities, interests, economic efforts, and needs not only of the consumers, but also of the producers, such as production techniques, packaging, and conservation methods that define the locality of produce. In other words, the Relative spatial dimensions are not comprehensive and inclusive enough in their most common interpretations; they can stand as viable principles only by broadening the scopes of the entities that they regard as local and by including the perspectives of the consumers.

If the Relative principle suffers from this wide array of counterarguments, the Absolute principle does not fare better. *First of all*, it equally suffers from the third criticism with which we confronted the Relative principle, because there is not always a single origin of the plants or animals in these cases (e.g., according to their disciplinary of productions,

there need not be a single origin of a pig to make Prosciutto di Parma<sup>22</sup> or of milk to make Roquefort cheese). *Secondly*, it is sometimes indeterminate how to fix the “original place” of a food—what is the origin of zucchini? Of couscous? Of Jollof rice? *Thirdly*, the Absolute principle covers only a small number of food items; it can hardly apply to generic foods and recipes, such as corn, rice, honey, chicken, soy sauce, cookies and flatbread. *Fourthly*, the Absolute principle can hardly account for the local character of recipes or diets that include ingredients produced in far regions. Striking examples abound here, like cocoa and sugar in Swiss and Belgian chocolate, or cinnamon, cardamom, and ginger in traditional ginger snaps consumed in Northern Europe. *Finally*, the Absolute principle underestimates the importance of various kinds of change that deeply affect food identity. Places change across time and so do their features that convey typicality to a food. If a place loses or modifies its climate, its soil, or its terrain, can it keep producing the same food? Climate change poses notorious “threats” to the identity of typical products in this sense (Borghini, Piras, & Serini ms.2). May, for instance, Champagne become local in Kent in a few decades (Reay 2019: 186)?

In conclusion, both the Relative and Absolute principles suffer from what we regard as decisive criticisms. These do not necessarily suggest that the underlying dimensions are to be completely abandoned. Rather, they call for supplementary conceptual resources that can make use of the two principles, when suitable, and point out additional criteria for spotting local foods.

### **§3.3 The Social Conception of Locality**

For those who choose to eat local, the Relative and Absolute principles are not the only dimensions through which qualitatively and quantitatively assess locality. In fact, the *social distance* between producers and consumers is another dimension often invoked in discourses regarding local food (Sandler 2015: 36). Social distance rests on a deeper idea of *place* that involves relationships and meanings in addition to physical space (Schnell 2013: 624). The

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of these controversial details of the disciplinaries, see for instance Marks, S., & Parravicini G. (2017) *Parma Ham Probe Shakes Confidence in EU Gourmet Labels* (Politico, 8 June 2017) <<https://www.politico.eu/article/parma-ham-probe-shakes-confidence-in-eu-gourmet-labels/>> accessed 3 June 2021.

shorter the social distance is, the more local the food is. A local place, within this perspective, is a space of human agency in which face-to-face interactions and bodily intimacy predominate over anonymous channels of food distribution. These social relations create personal connections with the food and those who grow or prepare it, providing a whole range of benefits. These include securing trust in producers, disseminating knowledge of the produce, enhancing healthy eating behaviors and culinary skills, reducing the environmental impact of food chains, and furthering selected aesthetic, social, and political values within a community.

The social dimension is grounded on a specific principle, which we call the Indispensability Principle for Local Foods: *a food is more local the more its supply chain involves a direct and social encounter between producer and consumer*. A social component is, thus, indispensable for a food to count as local. The encounter between producer and consumer should be direct, in the sense that there should be as few intermediaries as possible; also, it should be social, meaning that it should aim to be intimate, for instance to be face-to-face or to involve a conversation between producer and consumer. Finally, note that the Indispensability Principle sets only a *necessary* condition for the locality of food. Such a condition is likely to be *insufficient*, by itself, to deliver a suitable concept of locality. In fact, in the discourses of local food advocates, it is common to find the principle joined together with the Relative principle to create the model of a food community that exemplifies eating local at its best. More in general, one could supply the Indispensability principle with the Relative or the Absolute principle, or both. To illustrate, imagine for instance a tourist from Nanjing, China, who for several years spends her holidays in the island of Kauai, Hawaii. She regularly visits the Kauai coffee farm, gazes at the fields, meets the producers, and tastes the local coffee. When she eventually finds the same Kauai coffee on a shelf, in a supermarket in Nanjing, her social distance to the product is shortened and she may arguably think she is buying something more local to her space of agency than other coffees on the shelves.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Though this is an imaginary example, it is entirely in keeping with the practice of touring sites of origin of specialty products such as coffee, cocoa, and wine. More information on the Kauai farm can be retrieved at: <<https://kauaicoffee.com/>>.

The Indispensability Principle, however, faces several criticisms. First, it suffers from the same intrinsic vagueness of the Relative principle: determining how and when social proximity plays a role in our understanding of local food is a complex task, and it is even harder to promptly identify how social distance is affected by linguistic and identity elements. As Trivette (2014) argues, measuring human relationships and making comparisons between them is not only practically difficult, but it is also always influenced by personal involvement with the subject matter.

The second criticism somewhat relates to and expands on the first one. The food communication between producer and consumer, as well as the social distance, are not symmetric relationships. A food item can be local for an outsider, e.g., a tourist who is taking part in a wine and food tour, and not local for an insider, e.g., the cheesemaker who is selling her product. On the one hand, the social exchange could serve to negotiate encounters between diverging perspectives over food. Thus, even if a social, culinary, and cultural gap divides the tourist and the cheesemaker, the explicit effort to communicate the localness of food by the latter, and the active search of certain ethic and aesthetic values by the former, could actually reduce the distance between them. On the other hand, one could argue that communication can only do so much in changing food perceptions. Actually, it even risks corrupting the identity of the produce, by encouraging marketing strategies that overstretch the use of the “local food” tag while concealing the actual properties of the edible entity and the conditions under which it was produced (Gray 2013).

Finally, the social dimension of the supply chain is only one of the aspects determining the locality of a food and ultimately relies on an overly simplistic model (for the reasons illustrated in §3.2). First of all, the social and spatial dimensions of locality have not been spelled out comprehensively and will vary based on the kinds of food entities under consideration. Secondly, they fail to be inclusive because they discount the individual and collective perspectives as well as the gastronomic backgrounds of the parties involved in a local exchange. The case of vertical farming offers a nice illustration of the latter point. A fresh, minimally processed, and hyper-locally grown lettuce is far from unambiguously counting as local food. Even if vertical farming’s advocates are using the same idea of

reconnection with food origin expressed by local food movements, they know as well that the same technology could inspire distrust and a sense of alienation, i.e., the opposite of social proximity. Vertical farming would probably be considered the wise evolution of local and sustainable urban agriculture by someone with a high degree of confidence in technology and the betrayal of the local food movement's ideals by an advocate of local agriculture systems who recognizes specific values in the work of farmers.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the importance of the relational component appears even more clearly when the food item holds all the quantifiable properties for being considered local but, nonetheless, the purchaser feels alienated, for instance because of her belonging to a different gastronomic universe compared to the one the food is part of.<sup>25</sup>

#### **§4 Reorienting Local Food Choices**

We covered quite a bit of fresh theoretical terrain since the beginning of the paper, which can be summed up in the following four points. (i) We pointed out three novel problems for a viable conception of locality. First, the problem of proliferation, i.e., that in some instances the same food entity can be linked to (too) many places. Second, the problem of selectivity, i.e., that in some instances only some of the foods we consume are relevant to assess the localness of our dining experience. Third, the problem of independence, i.e., that the local character of different kinds of (possibly related) food entities within a same dining experience may be assessed independently of each other. (ii) In addition, we introduced a key distinction between single- and multi-placed conceptions of locality. (iii) Moreover, we highlighted that only a consideration of the ontological complexity of food entities (such as whole foods,

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<sup>24</sup> Compare the distinction between anthropological and technological fixes in Belasco (2008).

<sup>25</sup> Criticisms along this line surfaced often in public discourses about local food; see, for instance: Alter, L. (2019) *Vertical Farms: Wrong on So Many Levels* (Treehugger, 13 December 2019) <<https://www.treehugger.com/vertical-farms-wrong-so-many-levels-4857503>> accessed 4 June 2021; Cox, S. (2016) *Enough with the Vertical Farming Fantasies: There Are Still Too Many Unanswered Questions about the Trendy Practice* (Salon, 17 February 2016) <[https://www.salon.com/2016/02/17/enough\\_with\\_the\\_vertical\\_farming\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2016/02/17/enough_with_the_vertical_farming_partner/)> accessed 4 June 2021; Foley, J. (2018) *No, Vertical Farms Won't Feed the World* (GlobalEcoGuy, 1 August 2018) <<https://globalecoguy.org/no-vertical-farms-wont-feed-the-world-5313e3e961c0>> accessed 4 June 2021.

recipes, or menus), situated within the perspective of an individual or collective agent, can secure an inclusive conception of locality. (iv) Finally, we articulated two core dimensions of locality, the spatial and the social, along with their ramifications, and we contended that both suffer from important criticisms.

By dissecting a wide range of overlooked conceptual nuances and exposing a host of issues that await to be addressed, did we just show that local food and the local food movement have no future? By all means, no. We believe that the ties between food, place, and identity are too vital to human culture to be discarded. Although place and locality may not necessarily count as terminal values in our worldviews (see below), *place* guides our agency, including our dietary behaviours. To wit, our life-plans are often located (Heyd & Miller 2010) and the emotional aspects deep-seeded in our connections to foods link us individually and collectively to places. Finally, local food plays a fundamental role in economies, cultures, and lifestyles because of its special relation with a place and its inhabitants.<sup>26</sup> So, instead of dismissing the concept, we should try to propose new ways to conceive of it.

If, as many have argued, “local” should be used to guide the future of a movement that aims at reforming the food system, then we should turn it into what we have called a robust concept. To this end, we have so far developed a general account of locality that is *comprehensive* and *inclusive*, disentangling and mapping the key questions concerning the edible entities that can count as local as well as their dimensions of locality. Yet, this is not enough to deliver a robust conception. Besides, we must show how to *coherently* mesh such entities and dimensions with the values (ethical, political, aesthetic, etc.) that can inform our eating practices. The next task is, in other words, to properly register the give and take between the broadened ontological model of locality we put forward and the value-laden aspects of local foods.

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<sup>26</sup> A remarkable example recently featured in the news is the historical food market located on Berwick Street, in London’s West End. As Huber and Wolkenstein (2018) suggest, the key factor invoked by market traders in defending the long-standing economic structure of the market against gentrification is precisely its special role with and contribution to Soho’s history and culture.

We believe that building a perspective<sup>27</sup> with respect to the role of *place* in our own diet is a key tool in processes of identity construction. What remains to do is, then, to indicate *how* our broadened ontological perspectives on locality can be meshed with value-laden perspectives on eating local. The task at hand should not be misunderstood, however. We must not, in fact, pick specific value-laden perspectives. An axiological evaluation of specific perspectives on eating local lies beyond the goals of this paper since it is not a component of the philosophical toolbox we are developing here. Rather, we must indicate which formal desiderata any value-laden perspective on locality, be it carried forward by an individual agent or a community, should fulfill. To this end, in the remainder of the paper we suggest four key desiderata: gradability, width, negotiability, and fallibility. Each of them follows from the analysis we provided in the previous section. Unlike desiderata implicitly at play within extant conceptions of locality, we contend that our desiderata preferred conceptions of locality that can bode well with heterogeneous life-plans and that favor eating local also within culturally, ethically, and politically heterogeneous societies.

First, any specific perspective on local food should be *gradable*. It should allow one to say that some local foods are more local than others, for instance, because they are produced in regions that are geographically closer or because they foster social ties within a population. To illustrate, two zucchini grown within the same environment could be valued differently whether they are purchased directly from a small farmer or the grocery store instead: according to a perspective that weighs the relationship with the producer as relevant to locality, one zucchini would be more local than the other.<sup>28</sup> Gradability favors fine-tuning of the specific categories and values to real-world situations; it also facilitates negotiation between different perspectives on local food by avoiding all-or-nothing categories and judgments.

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<sup>27</sup> We use “perspective” in a rather technical sense here, to connote the development (by an individual or a community) of a specific realization of the ontological framework of local food that we provided in the paper.

<sup>28</sup> For appreciating to what extent the direct knowledge of the producers is crucial for many consumers to assess the locality of a food, see, for instance Loria, K. (2018) *In Produce, Local is Hotter than Ever* (Supermarket News, 8 December 2018) <<https://www.supermarketnews.com/produce-floral/produce-local-hotter-ever>> accessed June 3 2021.

Second, any specific perspective on local food should aspire to be *wide*, that is, it should encompass as many types of food entities as suitable. Wider perspectives are more inclusive, as we argued in §2. Some perspectives, for instance, may countenance the possibility that Peruvian ceviche made with ingredients from Iowa and salt from California can be a local dish.<sup>29</sup> For other perspectives, instead, the relevant food entities will be solely confined to whole foods or multi-ingredients foods.

Third, any specific perspective on local food should be *negotiable*. What counts as local should emerge in each instance from a negotiation of individual or collective values *vis-a-vis* the definition of the dimensions of locality and the kinds of food entities to which they shall apply (Röcklinsberg 2006; Ankeny 2016). The negotiation, moreover, happens also between different individual or collective agents and is influenced by the three previous desiderata.

During negotiations, agents single out the relevant elective properties that make a food local following implicit or explicit norms shared within a social *milieu* (Haslanger 2018). Making up one's own mind with respect to these issues takes time. It is a process of self-construction that shapes the identity of a person, a community, or an institution. However, the negotiation process could improve collective and individual agency bringing to light hidden social constraints, biases, and mindless rituals. That is, an explicit negotiation can shed light on the relation between individuals' agency and the social structures which frame their lives as social beings (Haslanger 2016) also when we come to local food (Noll & Werkheiser 2018).

For instance, an explicit negotiation process can display that how to fix the boundaries of what is local may depend on morphological conditions (e.g., in a mountainous territory divided into several valleys the scope of local would be limited due to the difficulty of transportation and poor communication among villages); social and political cohesion of a land (e.g., different ways of dividing up a territory give rise to different widths of the local)<sup>30</sup>;

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<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, the restaurant La Vecina in Coralville, Iowa, <<https://iowariverlanding.com/first-local-wood-fired-mexican-restaurant-to-open-in-coralville/>> accessed 3 June 2021.

<sup>30</sup> An interesting case study of drawing boundaries of local food areas has been examined by Grasseni (2011), who discusses the conflicts regarding the original boundaries of the Bitto cheese production area.



economic conditions (e.g., the scope of local depends on convenience), political views (e.g., alien foods become local by changing their names due to an incipient nationalism), institutions (e.g., restaurants, markets, kitchens built in a certain way), social behaviours (e.g., collective memory, dietary paths, food exposure), and social artefacts (e.g., diets, recipes, cookbooks). An explicit negotiation which takes into account those structural factors can furthermore elicit positive structural outcomes for the whole involved community: learning, experiencing different contexts, engaging in deliberation with others, and so on.<sup>31</sup>

Finally, any specific perspective on local food should be *fallible*, to ensure that its empirical and theoretical grounds can be assessed in a public and nonpartisan way (Reed 2002). The principles of local food that we discuss in the paper are, in fact, all fallible. They devise principled avenues to tell, within a given context of agency, local from non-local food. For example, the Indispensability principle prescribes measuring the locality of a food solely in terms of the social distance between producer and consumer, thereby leaving room for counterexamples (such as the ones provided in the paper). Moreover, a specific perspective on local food should be fallible with respect to the strategies it devises for achieving its aims. For example, a perspective that aims to foster rural economy within a community by advocating its members to purchase whole foods at the local farmers' market would be, in this latter sense, fallible.

These four desiderata (gradability, width, negotiability, fallibility), we contend, should inform any specific perspective on eating local because they best serve the goal of envisaging inclusive food policies and public health perspectives (Barnhill, King, Kass, & Faden 2014; Bonotti & Barnhill 2019). The way an individual agent makes up her mind and the way a community or an institution takes a stance with respect to local food, of course, can be multifarious. Locality can be a mean to celebrate the uniqueness of local culture (Weiss 2011), the importance of a located collective identity reflected in a product (Guy 2003), the sense of community involved in the common production (Paxson 2013), as well as additional values connected to environmental sustainability, aesthetic experiences, social cohesion,

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<sup>31</sup> For a wide review on recent works that study how social structures model individual food choices see Higgs and Ruddock (2019).

health, preservation of traditions, and so on.<sup>32</sup> Such differences are accentuated when we pass from the perspective of an individual—who may want to pursue a lifestyle—to that of an institution—managing health policies and dietary choices—or to that of a company—just think of an airline providing local menus on its flights. For instance, a company may plausibly regard being local as an instrumental value (*pace* Adams 2018).<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, it is equally plausible that for an individual agent “locality” is a placeholder term for a sense of belonging to a place, which is at the core of individual identity and cannot be seen as instrumental. The robust conception of eating local that we envisage shall be able to account for all of these conceptions and to create a framework that enhances dialogue between them and attenuates polarizing perspectives.

We believe that existing local accounts for local food already satisfy two desiderata (fallibility and gradability), but do not fulfill the others (wideness and negotiability). They have delivered promising approaches for defending the basic rights of homogeneous rural communities and for fostering their food sovereignty. Yet, based on what we argue, their approach is at the same time ill-suited to accommodate the circumstances of individual and collective agents whose eating local depends on a different range of food entities, which are independently associated to multiple places. To stay with an example we used in the paper, the Tunisian family living in Sassari, whose alleged locavorism rests on using as much as possible Logudoro’s ingredients while following Berberian recipes, would not fit extant typical conceptions of locavore diet. Another fitting example is offered by Ho (2020), that shows the complexity of the concept of locality at play within different communities residing in Hong Kong that use food as a means to foster cultural and social identities. In cases of this sort, the locality of food rests on a multi-placed conception, which includes in its scope (at least) ingredients and recipes. Locality is here the expression of a more or less explicit negotiation of identity—that, for instance, recognizes recipes as not essentially tied to a place, but as movable as its *performers*, and that leaves room for the latter to decide which

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<sup>32</sup> Of course, some of the values that local foods help realize may in turn be instrumental and not terminal.

<sup>33</sup> The instrumentality of local food was for instance invoked also in the Relative spatial conception, where distance is a means to achieve sustainability goals due to a low-emission transportation.

ingredients are apt for a locavolist rendition of the recipes. So, if our argument stands, choice of what is local implies a commitment to values as much as to some underlying ontology and, *vice versa*, modeling such ontologies (as we did) facilitates dialogue across perspectives of individuals, communities, and institutions.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The ideas contained in this essay developed during the conference *I linguaggi dell'identità: tra cucina e territorio* [The languages of identity: between cuisine and terroir] held on December 5-7, 2019 in L'Aquila, Italy and organized by Andrea Borghini, Donatella Donati, and Nicola Piras. Our view crucially benefited from discussions with Andrea Baldini, Donatella Donati, Patrik Engisch, and Matilde Pileri. We also wish to thank Allen Grieco, Min Kyung Lee, as well as three anonymous referees for helping us to improve the manuscript.

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