

Linking food choice with biodiversity

Berlin is the German city with the largest number of organic food stores, but dominant distributors and organic supermarkets exclude small scale farmers from the market. By dropping fences between producers and customers, a retailers' cooperative is raising public awareness about the relationship between food choices, food sovereignty, and the conservation of agrobiodiversity.

Jens Herbold

In 2009, three friends and I subrented a warehouse in Kreuzberg, one of Berlin's central neighborhoods. For organics, just as with conventional food chains, the control of the large retail groups is growing. This leaves almost no space for small producers. We wanted to shorten distribution chains and engage in trade with independent producers and production cooperatives and to start collective action towards food sovereignty.

This is how *Schnittstelle*, our retail cooperative, was born. The principle is simple. *Schnittstelle* aims to distribute cooperatively produced foods, seeds and beverages to consumers interested in supporting alternative forms of economy and agriculture. The producers we work with, many of them located in the vicinities of Berlin, are usually part of a Community Supported Ag-

riculture scheme or related networks of solidarity, and seek to increase their retailing opportunities. A number of the producers are agricultural cooperatives, for instance, we source pasta from the Iris Collective, a community that has been farming since the 1970s. Upon delivering their own goods many producers buy food from other collectives right away. Other customers are members of food or housing cooperatives.

When we start working with producers, together we assess our ideological compatibility. For example, we check if we share the same idea of 'organic'. Afterwards we discuss selling prices to find an 'economically correct' price – one that is affordable for those who pay, and is also fair for producers and distributors. It is a lot of work to make this is possible and we are always seeking new producers, consumers and volunteers.



Ringed beetroot produced by the Commune Gustritz.

An interface *Schnittstelle* means interface – the purpose of this initiative. As well as a food distributor, *Schnittstelle* is a platform for exchange of information between rural and urban areas and producers and consumers. On our blog and in our newsletter we discuss and showcase alternatives to the dominant capitalist, agricultural system. We used to organise film events but now other groups in Berlin, with similar interests, continue this activity.

A box full of biodiversity A recurring theme on our blog is agrobiodiversity, which is closely related to food sovereignty. In Germany, as in most parts



Schnittstelle sells products from traditional crops grown by small scale farmers.

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of Europe, a considerable portion of the food we eat comes from abroad. People do not choose what they eat, they choose from the range of products presented to them. As well as talking about agrobiodiversity, the best way to achieve its conservation is by eating it.

Therefore, in 2012 we started a box scheme with crops that had long become rare in supermarkets and food outlets. We called it the 'Biodiversity box scheme'. This box is delivered monthly to 50 subscribers. It is made up of unusual products, for example open pollinated vegetables, kamut (*Triticum turanicum*) pasta, fruit juice from old varieties, or rare seeds we obtain from small plant breeders. The boxes also include recipes and background information on these products so that people can learn about them. According to many subscribers this information is a highly valued part of the box.

Consumption for food sovereignty The Biodiversity box scheme seeks to raise awareness of how our food choices greatly influence agrobiodiversity. For example, in the 19th century there were about 1000 wheat varieties in Germany, which were adapted to our regional climate and soil. Now, only 30 remain. According to the Federal Varieties Office, as of April 2013, 734 cereal varieties are

approved for cultivation in Germany. That does not mean, however, that these all are cultivated. We wanted to focus people's attention on this issue and welcomed the opportunity to support a small brewery in Lower Bavaria, the Riedenburger Brauhaus. They produce beers from neglected cereals: millet, einkorn wheat (*Triticum monococcum*), spelt and farro (*Triticum dicoccon*). Their beers are regularly included in the biodiversity boxes, and so is the bread made from 'historical' cereals produced by the bakers collective Backstube. The bread is so popular that this bakery has now included it in their regular product line.

Moreover, through our business model, we also want to make consumers aware of their power to bring *people* back to the centre of agriculture and to act on that power. In industrial agriculture, farmers are often relegated to pure commodity producers. The cultivation of diverse varieties, on the other hand, is less monotonous and the labour involved should be remunerated accordingly. But producers, who practice small scale, diverse agriculture, have little chance to assert themselves against companies and retailers who dictate low prices. Cooperatives like Schnittstelle, by shortening the chain and building a network, make it possible for these producers to be paid fairly. By directly supporting small scale producers who preserve our biodiversity, we exercise our right to define our own fair and diverse food system.

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