



The Negotiation of Quality Standards: A Social Interactionist Approach to Fruit and Vegetable Distribution in Argentina

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Abstract. This article addresses food quality standards. It suggests that writing on standards creates a flat view of the subject, failing to grasp the richness of the multiple self-organizing practices that shape quality within functioning markets. The article documents the social dimension of quality and the ‘quality strategies’ developed by fresh-food wholesalers, greengrocers and producers in the Buenos Aires Wholesale Central Market, Argentina. These strategies assemble the fresh-food market and construct a representation of quality as an aspect of trade in places where food exchanges are conducted. Using a social interactionist approach, we propose that attention needs to be given to the settings in which food quality standards are negotiated and used by different actors. In so doing we suggest that studies that focus on the diffusion of ‘global’ quality standards should not omit consideration of differential responses to these standards, even if the conditions appear relatively homogeneous.

Introduction

This article focuses on the contribution that ethnographic observation and human practices in markets can make to our understanding of global food standards.¹ Our intention is not to add further to a theory on standards, but rather we want to argue that writing on food standards typically presents a one-dimensional view of the subject, failing to grasp the richness of the multiple self-organizing practices that shape quality within local contexts.

Studies that draw attention to the significance of the enforcement and implementation of quality standards as a governance device for food typically portray added-value food chains as centralized and integrated. In contrast we propose a social interactionist approach to markets; it emphasizes the meanings and negotiations conferred on notions of quality by different social actors presenting us with multilevel negotiations that conspire around notions of quality and standards. These

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negotiations are part of the nature of situated processes that connect issues of quality within the supply and demand of food.

In the following discussion we argue that despite the prevalence of global institutional codes and standards, consensus over local food quality is embedded within sets of situated social interactions. These interactions are associated with an arena in which negotiations over quality standards take place between different actors. To illustrate this approach, we present three cases of how quality practices are enacted through retailing practices within the Buenos Aires Wholesale Central Market (BAWCM). These cases demonstrate how an understanding of the importance of quality in developing market strategies by food service providers reveals the social aspects of quality in the organization of real market interactions. Building on these cases, our article seeks to capture how retailers use quality to manage the ever-increasing segmentation of the BAWCM.

The BAWCM is situated in a metropolitan area called Gran Buenos Aires, strategically located 12 km from downtown Buenos Aires, near Ezeiza International Airport and Río de La Plata Port. It is important for fruit and vegetable distribution in Argentina, supplying more than 11 million consumers (33% of the total Argentinean population) and receiving approximately 13 000 trucks per week from production areas both within and outside the country. The volume of fresh fruit and vegetable commercialized at this marketplace is 1 500 000 tons a year (Fernandez Lozano, 2008), significantly more than its original model, Rungis in Paris, which commercializes 960 000 tons a year (Semmaris, 2009).

Our research in the BAWCM began by asking how situated practices and local procedures encounter global standards. The method used for this study draws on an interpretative approach of new materialities folding and unfolding through the contemporary expansion of food worlds (Morgan et al., 2006). Everyday practices are taken into account through participant observation (Arce and Long, 2010), which sought to capture the practices carried out by greengrocers, wholesalers and producers in relatively bounded social and economic events, such as commercial interactions and explanations about produce qualities and values. This fieldwork was conducted in the BAWCM from February to May 2008. Buyers' and sellers' narratives allowed us to follow the self-imaging and self-narrativizing of quality and safety of food construction from actors' perspectives. This methodology leads us to use ethnographic illustration to validate our discussion.

In the following sections we develop our theoretical perspective through a discussion of interconnected issues concerning the centrality of quality in understanding 'real markets' like the BAWCM.

Approaching Quality and Quality Standards

The Oxford English Dictionary² defines quality as a degree of excellence of something measured against other similar things; different attributes make something what it is. In the case of food, these attributes include parameters linked to health safety, nutrition, sensory/organoleptic characteristics (taste, colour, freshness, appearance, smell), process (traceability, biotechnology, organic) and extrinsic factors (price, brand, or advertising) (Noelke and Caswell, 2000; Sterns et al., 2001). Food quality is assembled through time (seasonality) and space (geographical origin). This broad definition of quality is used by international bodies such as Codex Alimentarius (FAO, 2006).

Consumer awareness of food risk has added impetus to quality concerns (Henson and Caswell, 1999; Miles and Frewer, 2001; Henson and Reardon, 2005), and the apparent reduction of quality in modern food has generated a significant body of critical research in Western countries that focuses on the growth of alternative agri-food networks (e.g. Murdoch et al., 2000; Goodman, 2003). As consumer reaction to industrialized food circuits has increased, fears over contamination have risen, as have concerns over social justice and environmental sustainability (Kloppenborg et al., 2000; Allen et al., 2003; Trauger, 2007). Convenience products may imply industrial and chemical food processing accompanied by negative impacts on the environment (Renard, 1999). However, consumers also buy convenience products (frozen, canned, or cut vegetables and ready-to-eat meals) in supermarkets with little or no idea about the products' origins (Busch, 2004). Thus, quality is a fluid and socially constructed conception that is created and recreated through the discourses and actions of actors (Marsden and Arce, 1995; Morris and Young, 2000). Social aspects related to quality in food have an important role in defining new criteria for organizing food production, distribution and consumption.

The introduction of the notion of quality is credited to the economist Lancaster (1966), who asserted that products consist of a bundle of attributes. According to Lancaster, a product's utility is derived from the attributes it holds as part of its content (Sterns et al., 2001). However, this view of quality has long been supplemented (Marsden and Arce, 1995; Noelke and Caswell, 2000) with the argument that social actors have their own perceptions of quality according to the nature of their social and environmental (natural) embeddedness (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000; Goodman, 2003). Thus, quality is partially constituted by the ways in which actors and their social networks categorize, code, process and impute a bundle of attributes to food products.

For those authors working on alternative agri-food networks connected to the analysis of contemporary food supply chains, emphasis is placed on reconnecting contemporary food with social relations and ecological environments – nature (Murdoch et al., 2000; O'Hara and Stagl, 2001; King, 2008). Attention given to quality standards after their creation usually takes the form of a general reflective effort to account for the failures or successes of the alternative food networks of particular producers. Surprisingly little attention is paid to how the quality economy is established in markets (Viteri, 2010).

One exception to this pattern is the work of Karpik (1989), who points to the existence of a quality economy involving the exchange of differentiated products. His work demonstrates the importance of considering how some social networks have the capacity to intervene in the definition of a situation to determine the 'quality price' of a product or service. In our cases, social interactions between different retailers give rise to networks that exchange and diffuse information, not only on the price of products but also on who the actors are and who sets the price. This process guides receivers of information about quality price with regard to the existing supply and demand of fresh products, and this leads in turn to the development of a new price allocation based on social information. Following this line of argument, the quality of food in a wholesale market may be assessed by means of how the social networks of different actors attribute value to food products through the certainty of face-to-face transactions. Alongside accord and agreement, this may involve claims, grievance processes, and counterclaims.

The notion of quality is associated with an uncertain materiality of the product that must be grappled with by social actors in the market. This tendency has been addressed by engineering processes of standardization, through private alliances and platforms to bring different actors and interests together in order to generate 'quality certainty' within the global supply and demand of food. Thus, a standard is something considered by an authority (government or private alliance of retailers) or by general consent (consumers, culinary patrimony, producers, and a variety of food retailers) as a basis of comparison in order to establish a price. Through these governance processes, representations of an average standard requirement for quality, quantity, and grade of the product are the basis upon which price is judged to be acceptable (or not) to a community of buyers and sellers, who represent a constituency of producers and consumers.

Historically, grades and quality standards have been associated with differentiated measurement and technical methods and the reduction of transaction costs (Jones and Hudson, 1996; Caswell et al., 1998; Berdegue et al., 2005). Consequently, the implementation of standards is important as a general instrument of organization in the re-construction of 'modern' supply systems (Busch, 2000; Henson and Reardon, 2005; Hatanaka and Busch, 2008). Private standards imposed by large retailers (e.g. supermarkets) aim to facilitate the efficient coordination of global food supplies. These responses to the global circulation of food do not necessarily mean that multinational retailers get what they are trying to achieve, namely the global homogenization of food quality. In practice this may be challenging the homogenization of quality standards.

The coordination of the global food value chain (Dolan and Humphrey, 2000; Humphrey and Schmitz, 2001; Reardon et al., 2001; Gibbon, 2003) may satisfy legal and commercial global quality requirements 'everywhere'. This global organizational response to the procurement and distribution of food involves often a conscious reduction of the locally situated range of fresh produce varieties circulating in the domestic market. As an example, transnational enterprises demand that local suppliers worldwide follow international and abstract codes of conduct, production guidelines, and monitoring standards for products. These codes, guidelines, and standards exist in the imagination of global managers and in voluminous documents on standard systems, but we argue that they are not tangible within the territorial existence of food.

Global food suppliers justify international quality standards as technical devices, encouraging national food business sectors to take advantage of global market opportunities that are presented as critical determinants of contemporary economic progress. What results is the introduction of technological modernization programmes (hybrid, greenhouse, irrigation, etc.) to allow growers to produce homogeneous (colour, texture, taste, size, etc.) fruit and vegetables and abandon established practices and product varieties that are incompatible with global quality standards.

Having established global quality standards as a management response, the use of actor network approaches and conventions theory (Wilkinson, 1997; Murdoch et al., 2000; Goodman, 2003; Busch, 2007) has led to important contributions on how economic and quality processes (natural, local origin food, etc.) are embedded in different worlds of production and distribution. However, in our view the issue of quality embeddedness and how it organizes demand in specific food markets does not go far enough towards exploring the significance of the contribution made by

the content of quality settings in the supply of products to segmented markets of food demand.

Situating Quality Standards and Quality Setting

Writers on global standards concur that individual normative criteria for a variety of fresh products are assembled by complex alliances of multinational food retailers companies, consumers, NGOs and national governments in novel forms of global agri-food governance. These quality standards (such as GlobalGAP) are representations of new regulatory devices associated with the global spread of private space and the increasing power of large food retailers (Campbell, 2005). It is also argued that when standards are analysed vis-à-vis the 'oligopolistic structure' of food sectors, these standards (quality and safety) make the opaque practices of the retailing sector visible and this may reduce producers' risk to access markets. However, producers' compliance with regulations does not alter their dependence or their vulnerable position when they enter the value chain of major retailers (Tennent and Lockie, 2012).

We would argue that disagreements about quality and safety standards are underpinned by weaknesses in analytical understanding about the status and representations of the market (for an exception, see Busch, 2007). Nevertheless, the proliferation of standards provides a base upon which to focus on the fragmented character of food circulation (i.e. luxury food, organic, fair trade, etc.) and the effect on processes of organizing differentiated food markets within which knowledge and skills flow unabated from production to consumption.

The potential contribution of this conceptualization is a focus on the functioning of quality in food markets. One central concern involves the treatment of actors as specific insiders to one or more spaces, civic, value chain, and/or 'real market'. This perspective challenges homogeneous representations of quality food standardization and identifies socially different aesthetics,³ namely the material experience of the embeddedness of the market and how this greets the sensate life of food (embodiment) circulation and its insertion into the world of consumer demand and the affective forces that are generated in encounters between producer, retailers and consumers.

In short, quality standards may be linked to the expansion of the private space of elite alliances and food management. However, quality setting suggests that the actors participating in real markets, which in our case is a wholesale market, are active and able to construct the entanglements of market embeddedness and food embodiments as elements of the social differences of quality (aesthetics).⁴

Our perspective on food retailers is one of different manifestations of quality-led food. These manifestations are perpetuated despite the expansion of quality management by multinational food retailing companies and national government policies favouring private interests. In this respect, quality and safety are important normative components for novel global forms of food supply and demand management. Recognizing different manifestations of quality should prompt further inquiries into other forms of quality attribution that are not part of this universal, hierarchical and homogeneous device designed to govern food through private self-regulated requirements.

By analysing situations in food markets we gain an insight into how actors' social interactions and experiences shape quality and safety standards. The affective

experience of actors is not usually seen as an important part of agri-food quality and safety standard studies, despite the particular actor's experience on the boundaries of the material and the social embeddedness of the quality attributed to food. The interlacing of the physical experience of food (touch, feel) with the intensities of smell and colour is a register of quality that serves as a catalogue of experiences and perceptions of the sensual expression of consumers in the retail market.

Thus, values of transnational integration encapsulate a particular mode of supervision that we find expressed in the quality control standards of the food chain and food governance. In our view, this interpretation is valid, but only part of the story. By looking at the goods (here fresh fruit and vegetable) as 'objects in motion', we focus attention on the changing ways in which goods create social identities and establish historical trajectories (Appadurai, 1986) linked to livelihoods, incomes and local entrepreneurial forms of organization of food commoditization.

Whereas a process of successive qualifications and requalifications constructs the social careers of food products and social actors, active participation leads to the exchange of information and knowledge about actors themselves, the space of the market, the nature of the produce and of course the appropriate price. Actors integrate the singularity of their interactions into their own food practices and strategies. These social actors retain a degree of autonomy and decision-making separate from global tendencies towards the homogenization of quality standards. This creates a semi-autonomous field in which we observe that quality is part of the social life of food (Arce, 2009).

In brief, a social interactionist approach argues that quality and quality standards cannot be exclusively understood in terms of objective factors associated with differentiated measurement and technical methods and the reduction of transaction costs; rather, such problems are rooted in processes of negotiations between the making and growth of quality and the assembly and growth of practices servicing food to segmented consumer markets where the supply and demand of fresh food is historically and geographically produced and known (quality) as contingent practices to actors (cf. Yates-Doerr, 2012). In other words, quality comprises the practice and activities of consumer linkages and groups making assertions of grievances and claims to a multiplicity of material quality demands.

Quality regarded as part of global dislocation problematizes encounters within local markets as potential opportunities from distant markets and also to conform to certain mandatory standards. Quality issues emerge within existing food provider services: some retailers negotiate and particular producers demand that existing food services respond in new ways to global standards; other retailers assert quality as part of their particular needs to distribute food to segmented markets. Our three case illustrations have great heuristic value, each of these cases reinforces the idea that both locally established quality criteria and newly created global standards must be viewed as an arena in which different social actors attempt to impose their own quality setting to deal with the reality of the food situation.

Setting the Scene: The Context of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables in Argentina

The multifarious climate of Argentina gives rise to heterogeneity in fruit and vegetable production. Different provinces have specific agro-ecological conditions; fruit in particular is associated with the identity of geographical regions (Viteri and Ghezán,

2006). Fruit and vegetables are also imported from neighbouring countries and from Europe.

Fruit and vegetable production is important for employment and trade. More than 90% of fresh vegetables is produced and sold within localized domestic markets, while 62% of fresh fruit is used in industrial activities (wine, juice, pulp, and essential oils). Overall the fresh fruit and vegetable industry contributes USD 1,800 million to national exports, representing 3.2% of the total value of Argentinean exports in 2007 (Viteri and Ghezán, 2006; INDEC, 2008).

In general, the Argentinian domestic market of fresh produce is supplied well throughout the year. In spite of the relative abundance of supply, prices vary because of temporary shortages of some fruit and vegetables associated with weather adversities and logistical problems. Buyers and sellers consider these aspects at the point of purchase.

Consumption of Fresh Products

According to Aguirre (2005), growing poverty among the Argentinian population has led to a fall in the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables. However, while poverty issues have to be recognized, we consider that other social aspects influence consumer habits. According to Fernández Lozano (2008), different forces are at play: on the one hand, Argentinians have started to appreciate the quality and nutritive value of fresh produce; on the other hand, the criterion of saving time on buying and preparing food often prevails over searching for quality. These preferences are linked to changes in consumer habits. For instance, the increased amount of time women spend outside the home due to work has reduced the time available to prepare food. This has favoured the development of a food service sector (bars, restaurants, institutional food services, and fast-food places), particularly in large urban areas.

Even though there are discontinuities in consumption according to the economic and cultural situation in Argentina, wealthy consumers continue to buy fresh cuts such as ready-to-eat salads and other minimally processed fresh fruit and vegetable products (Viteri, 2003). Argentinians still prefer to buy fresh fruit and vegetables at specialized shops rather than at supermarkets (INDEC, 1998, 2009). The reasons for this preference are the proximity of shops, quality, competitive price, freshness, and the vendor's knowledge and advice. Aulicino and Moré (2000) classify these consumers as traditional since they still buy fresh produce that requires time to buy and prepare. However, consumers today are reorganizing their practices and combine traditional and modern values within their practices, so it is not unusual for a person in Buenos Aires to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables both at a supermarket and at the nearest greengrocer.

Quality Setting: The Case of BAWCM

We are keen to capture the character of the social space of the Buenos Aires fresh fruit and vegetable wholesale market in order to situate it within a wider context. The wholesale market was built in the 1970s and has been operating since 1984 with the nation state being one of the main institutions involved in its construction. According to policymakers, it was necessary to regulate the speculative activities of

wholesalers, since they used to retain a large percentage of the growers' net income (Pons, 1988). As Frigerio (1973) and Gerarduzzi (2000) point out, the creation of the BAWCM was 'politically motivated by an anti-wholesaler mentality' (see Viteri, 2010, p. 41). The idea was to bring 23 markets and warehouses under public control, where modern buildings, sanitary control, light, sewage, and easy modern access each fulfil the modernization and quality requirement of policymakers.

The space of the wholesale market represented for policymakers a modern place to distribute fresh produce according to ideas of quality and efficiency. However, as we shall demonstrate, distribution of quality through the market is materialized through action by all its users, not only policymakers. It is part of a lived-in space, where practices associated with quality and quality standards encounter global management methods. The result is a market space where knowledge and actors' practices are central to an understanding of the process of negotiation and the meaning of quality that serves to differentiate fresh produce.

The Interaction between Supermarkets and Wholesalers

The arrival of foreign retailing companies transformed the distribution of fresh fruit and vegetables in Argentina (Ghezán et al., 2002). Intense competition between large retailers in the 1990s led to new commercial strategies and change in procurement procedures used to obtain fresh products. These transformations bring out how supermarkets recognize the significance of the national wholesale market sector and develop negotiation strategies. Such encounters highlight the existence of often diverse and conflicting interests between global and domestic producers and retailers, and how negotiations serve to build bridges between wholesalers and supermarkets. Some wholesalers are able to evaluate information to face global quality challenges; this allows new modes of accommodation to develop within specific networks in order to achieve specialization. Wholesalers and larger retailers – with diverse economic interests – create innovative partnerships that increase organizational food distribution options.

This situation can be illustrated through Sabino's case. The relationship between Sabino and large retailers shows different quality perceptions, which go beyond the abstract global quality code. Sellers and buyers negotiate quality according to diverse circumstances (temporal shortage, historical relations, knowledge, information, etc.). This implies heterogeneous ways of distributing fresh fruit and vegetables.

Sabino's Enterprise

Sabino is a 45-year-old Italian who owns a holding comprising five different firms. One supplies restaurants, hotels, institutional canteens, etc. The second is a vegetable association with 20 growers and packers. The third deals with transport. The fourth is a repackaging station of fresh-cut vegetables. Lastly, the fifth is the wholesale Sabino S.R.L., a firm he started in 1984 at the BAWCM.

Sabino's commercial activities represent the ways in which a wholesaler engages with supermarkets' purchasing procedures, reflecting an efficient logic for the supply of year-round consistent quality, variety and volume within the fresh fruit and vegetable chain (cf. Dolan and Humphrey, 2000). Sabino's enterprise improved its

services according to the international supermarket guidelines for quality and the reliability of distribution practices. Sabino used commercial activities to construct hands-on knowledge to bridge the wholesale market sector, official discourses and supermarkets, and, in this respect, he is an innovator in food retailing. Sabino's commercial services connected elements of what is possible in Argentina with the global logic of supermarkets, achieving a reduction of transaction costs around an emergent economy of qualities. Sabino recalled:

'During the 1990s, we used to grow according to supermarket norms of market control and expansion. Supermarkets tried to diminish their transaction costs by avoiding intermediaries. It was at this point that we started to supply them with our own production (particularly tomatoes and green, leafy vegetables). We positioned ourselves as a full-service wholesale provider to add value to quality fresh produce. We invested in facilities and logistics and started to classify products by size and quality. This saved time from the moment of harvest to the moment of selling the product in retailers' shops.'

'Supermarkets are our main customers; because of their high-volume demand they are very attractive for business. Since I wanted our products to attract customers, I started to supervise the handling of products. Thus, we trained our own personnel who used to go to different supermarkets to control "other" employees not to destroy the traceability of our fresh products and to stop them from mixing different brands and qualities. We made them aware of the quality they offered to consumers' (interview, December 2006).

This ethnographic text expresses how the wholesaler gives meaning to his experience of interacting with supermarkets. Quality is here a synonym of services, and services imply a social network of fresh product handling according to different quality modes of food and business knowledge, a practice that transformed the existing market space.

Our observations support the view that relations between Sabino and the supermarkets cut across existing configurations of production, retailing and consumption. These relations have oriented him to integrate primary production in the construction of a chain where the new social view of the sector is internalized and reworked within the specific and problematic context of supermarkets. Sabino bought a cooperative of growers in 2000/2001 and started to invest in sustainable agricultural practices. He made this business decision after observing the evolution of fresh fruit and vegetable demand in the high-income sectors in Argentina.

Sabino's insightful and interesting experience tells us of his successes and tribulations as a local innovator.

'We started our encounters with supermarkets doing the tasks required and providing a fresh shipper service, aligned with low environmental impact practices. Our vegetable chain was under strict quality control, and we wanted to show our commitment to the environment by increasing the number of quality consumers through the supply of our own fresh product brand (BIOS). However, it is difficult to link environmental and organic production practices with a quality-specific consumer category... not even a single supermarket was accepted as commercially viable to support food environmental agronomic technologies.'

'Even when entrepreneurs like me have realized the value of organic agromonic practices, I cannot deploy my market creativity because of lack of investment and I disagreed with international supermarket strategies' (interview, May 2007).

Sabino's relationship with supermarkets illustrates how only a few wholesalers were able to introduce flexibility in terms of financial organization, work practices and basic production processes oriented to consolidate their influences through processes of international integration across established national or regional food provision. In addition, Sabino wanted to take advantage of his commercial position by implementing his own brand of environment-friendly products. However, there was no room to negotiate and be supported by supermarkets. Although Sabino increased his commercial creativity during his first years as a supermarket supplier, he felt a lack of support from supermarkets. Thus, Sabino identifies innovation with the rich local wholesalers' knowledge of the vegetable and fruit and vegetable sector, rather than with supermarkets. Argentinian wholesalers encountered global challenges and he proudly adds:

'I never left the Buenos Aires market because the formation of prices takes place here. However, it was difficult to make supermarkets understand how to play with prices; we realized that we worked in a completely different way' (interview, May 2007).

Sabino and a few other wholesalers comply with the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) code. These wholesalers have a strong commercial position and they remain optimistic about their capacity to conquer consumer loyalty through quality. Sabino's commercial strategy is not to sever ties completely from supermarkets but instead to create space for supplying premium-quality fresh-cut vegetables to restaurants and international hotels. According to Sabino, few supermarket companies are interested in developing growers' brands, preferring to concentrate on their own profits rather than enabling growers to improve their relationships with consumers.

Methodologically, Sabino's case goes beyond value-chain or generic food interpretations, challenging us to rethink the social dimension of quality within a segmented food market. Everyday social practices explain that quality not only refers to product attributes, but also to social organization, communication, and knowledge. This illustration represents the quality issues an interactionist takes into account in a study of the setting in which food quality standards are negotiated. We have argued that in the analysis of these issues an important consideration must be the differing interpretations and thus negotiations of actors.

Greengrocers and Different Quality Standards

Greengrocers are as important as wholesalers for generating an organizational dynamic around the allocation of quality to fresh products in Argentina. They are a critical point of intersection for fresh product distribution to consumers from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The interactions of greengrocers with wholesalers and consumers constitute a prime example of the pitfalls of equating quality with global quality standards because they situate quality in local social relationships and promote the exchange of knowledge, entrepreneurship, and food quality products in different consumer markets.

Focusing on the actions of greengrocers allows us to observe social components of quality, including knowledge, relationships, and passion, each emerging during commercial transactions between buyers and sellers. The following illustrations show how different entrepreneurs take into account multiple quality demands when organizing fresh food distribution. Although government and private standards contribute to the organization of actors' experiences, buyers and sellers deal with diverse standards constructed as a result of complex decisions and the selective incorporation of skills, experience, and different interests.

The first case is of a small firm organized by an entrepreneur who started delivering high quality fresh produce to high income consumers in May 1990 and made quality setting the hallmark of his business. However, this was only possible because of his embeddedness in the BAWCM. Nevertheless, this relationship was not free from conflict between the small firm and suppliers from the wholesale market. In contrast, the second case demonstrates how quality is constructed by a food provider who services a low-income neighbourhood in Buenos Aires and whose success was based on experience rather than a global quality standard. Although change is apparent within the fresh produce market, there is still the possibility of combining tacit and formal knowledge, a process permitted by the nature of relationships between buyers and sellers.

Federico's Enterprise

This enterprise is located 60 km from Buenos Aires and covers a large geographical area. The firm delivers other products apart from fresh fruit and vegetables, including flowers, meat, artisanal cheese, fish, ham, olive oil, preserves, and aromatics. Products are pre-washed and packaged for optimal conservation, ensuring freshness, high quality, and hygiene.

Federico, the entrepreneur who started the company, is from a middle-class family who used to own a vegetable patch in the 1980s. At university Federico understood that offering quality fresh products throughout the year would be an interesting niche market. Nowadays the enterprise offers over 2,000 deliveries per week, including over 2,500 boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Federico's enterprise uses the BAWCM as its purchasing point, using a loyal group of wholesalers to complement direct purchases from market gardeners (50% of his fresh products). Every day Federico phones different wholesalers and asks about the available quality and quantity of about 10 products that he needs to buy. The following is an observation of Federico at work.

'Federico (with an employee) is sampling an orange to check its flavour. Although they do not stop at each stall for more than 5 or 10 minutes, they spend as much as 5 hours buying products at the BAWCM. During this time they constantly compare products and stalls according to quality, price and origin. Federico points to a potato bag of the Villa Dolores (Cordoba) brand, which is also the name of a geographical region preferred by greengrocers, but Federico knows that these bags come from another region. The brand name is a marketing device, which according to Federico confuses newcomers and inexperienced people like this researcher.'

'Brand manipulation of the best known potato region is a clear demonstration that a notion of quality is involved in market control. The official

standard for horticulture produce (Secretaría de Agricultura y Ganadería Resolution 297/83) classifies potatoes by degrees of quality and size. According to Federico, however, the geographical region influences the preference and price of potatoes at the BAWCM. Federico is proud to state that it is relatively easy to start a fresh fruit and vegetable business, but knowing about quality takes a lifetime. It is here that Federico stresses the importance of creating strong relationships with wholesalers to improve his knowledge and self-confidence about the produce he supplies' (observation, April 2007).

The network of BAWCM relationships surrounding fresh product distribution allows Federico to construct quality criteria to supply customer orders to a standard they appreciate. Nevertheless, social relations are dynamic and susceptible to fracture. This was the case for the relationship between Federico's enterprise and a medium-sized wholesaler during the 2001 economic crisis. Federico had to stop paying many suppliers. Although there was diminished demand during the national economic crises, he strived to continue offering quality products, using his relations with wholesalers to obtain supplies on credit.

Against a background of economic crisis, the delivery of quality is reliant on the social relations around the quality commercial transactions (embeddedness). When Federico began to repay his debts to the wholesalers one of them treated him very badly, according to an employee of Federico, so they decided not to pay and stopped buying fresh produce from his stall. It affected the personal reputation and uniqueness of Federico's business vis-à-vis other suppliers. This highlights how social and economic changes are important contingencies, generating tensions within networks.

Antonio's Enterprise

This is the case of a greengrocer operating at one of the city's busiest train stations, servicing low-income consumers. Antonio is a 53-year-old greengrocer who is characterized by a wholesaler as 'an expert in fresh fruit and vegetables'. His reputation is linked to notions of food quality. He remembers that employees of the municipal council targeted him because his street selling activity was forbidden by law. However, in spite of his trading being characterized as *ciruja* (scavenger) when he started, he used to wear his best clothes to boost sales of quality products. Smart clothes were a way for Antonio to show in public that he embodied and exuded quality; an individual style to support his low-income food business.

Antonio's shop is open 24 hours a day. Antonio has a partner, but he is solely responsible for supply and pricing. Antonio's purchases are based on his experience, knowledge and relationships with wholesalers. He buys fruit in the Buenos Aires market, but he also goes to a wholesale market for quality vegetables in Bolivia. Antonio's routine is to visit between five to 12 stalls in the BAWCM; however, before going to the market, he contacts vendors, then starts buying at 12 p.m. based on the information he collected by phone, so vendors know what Antonio is looking for.

The market vendor knows that Antonio is a frequent and expert buyer who appreciates quality products with prices negotiated according to quality. Nevertheless, the vendor and Antonio set a price that takes into account the time of day, because this affects the value of the produce. Since Antonio always goes to the wholesale

market at midday, he is able to negotiate profitable prices and maintain social relationships with suppliers. These factors are involved in the context of the transaction and price.

Antonio does not taste products as this is a sign of ignorance for him: 'experience gives you the knowledge to identify quality by appearance', he argues. However, when he tried a kiwi before buying we asked why. He explained: 'the last time I bought acid ones'.

Antonio uses appearance as a proxy for taste and quality in order to decide the products he likes to buy. He says, 'if I like these products, my customers will buy them'. For him, quality is a matter of how the food looks and smells when he buys it; this provides the foundation of his knowledge. He does this following an understanding of what his customers like; it shows a connection between him and his customers that defines food quality according to his perception of what the customer will buy. It presents us with Antonio's skills to support his livelihood in the urban reality of demand for fresh products. This 'trading' reality offers an ambiguous ontology not easily encapsulated by national or global standards. Yet, describing everyday knowledge and beliefs as contingent assumptions and not as a dependent situation of traditional forms of calculation, exploitation or rationality, enables researchers to think about the quality of food as a materiality in new ways, and not just as a governance tool.

Here we find that the social relations of the wholesale market (embeddedness) are activated through the corporeal fluidity of the fruit – the kiwi may be different in two days time in the same place – and the fruit's thickness, represented by taste and colour, length (small, medium, large) and breadth (shape) is a corporeality (kiwi) that actualizes Antonio's relationships with the fruit and the wholesaler.

Social interaction within the market place is a property of what wholesale market services are for: a repetitive performance confirming assessment of the character and attributes of fruit and vegetables. This exchange concludes as a matter of judgment rather than choice over what fresh foods are like (quality). It remains as experiential knowledge of the local/tacit standards in action, influencing future purchases from producers and the path towards customer consumption practices of a kiwi in some neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires. The elements exchanged in those relationships go beyond abstract prices and strict quality degrees. It is possible to explain the importance of non-commoditized elements in different transactions of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Construction of a National Standard

In North-western Argentina, three innovative entrepreneurs developed a new variety of avocado and created a local association in 2002, the National Avocado Producers Association, which exported avocados to Chile and Europe (Ignoto and Figueroa, 2007). These highly organized growers asked the Secretariat of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Food (SAGPyA) to change the official quality protocol from appearance to credence based on 'objective attributes' of avocados (i.e. dry matter and dry weight).

This private attempt at quality objectification of avocados sought to homogenize national production according to international standards. The action generated social and political interactions between public and private actors, creating the material conditions for confrontations between avocado growers. These confrontations

were part of the ongoing process of quality setting involving negotiation, adaptation and the transfer of meaning between different producers and retailers. This issue, we believe, is important in understanding the intended and unintended consequences of international quality standards. Here the quality standard is initiated 'from below' by a group of producers.

The objectification and measurable legitimation of avocado attributes was seen by some growers and the government as an important factor in promoting avocado exports and in securing a position in the international market. This process entailed both covert and overt power routes, as well as the interweaving of contrasting, and seemingly incompatible, interests. It highlights how the arena of quality setting involves not so much a confrontation of definitions of quality but rather a practice of distinct quality repertoires based upon different interests, and the implications these different interests might have for negotiating and defining market control.

Avocado Producers Association

These processes can be illustrated through a case relating to the national standard for avocados in Argentina. The Ministry of Agriculture (SAGPyA, 2008) wanted to improve quality standards to gain an export market and thus joined forces with the National Avocado Producers Association. It was held to be a practical mechanism for creating 'order' within avocado production; however, small- and medium-scale producers interpreted this turn to quality as a political move to eliminate them from the national market. This interpretation gained force when policymakers and large producers characterized the small- and medium-scale sector as comprised of disorganized competitors. A controversy over the social and market significance of avocado quality led to a series of struggles between different producers, business interests, and policymakers. The avocado quality initiative became a policy arena characterized by a disagreement over whose interests quality represented. Struggles included one group in favour and one group against export-oriented fruit and vegetable production as a means of participating in the global market rather than in the domestic market.

Small- and medium-scale growers were not convinced of the efficacy of the national quality standard pertaining to avocados as a mechanism for ordering fruit quality for the domestic market. They claimed that the national quality standard was a political alliance to establish a norm that was expensive and bureaucratic and a vertical form of control. They considered that this new norm favoured the interests of the export sector rather than production for national markets and Argentinean consumers of avocados.

This brought out opposition to productivity improvements and the use of expensive technology from small producers and retailers in the wholesale market. The certification of quality, encompassing diverse and conflicting elements of modernization, represented the basis for the reorganization of the avocado sector. In effect, modes of quality developed around the point of contention regarding the importance of avocado diversity, which meant keeping different prices and perceptions of quality among producers, retailers and consumers within specific networks; hence resisting quality standardization.

The association of large avocado growers finally achieved the official national avocado standard. However, this quality criterion failed to stop medium and small avocado producers from selling their products. Consequently, the Avocado Produc-

ers Association complained that it was necessary to legally stop the commercial circulation of non-certified avocados to improve and manage the quality of the Argentinian avocado. The association of large avocado producers argued that they were subjected to unfair competition (Ignoto and Figueroa, 2007).

Both medium and small producers and an important group of retailers believed that keeping a diversity of avocados in the market allowed consumers to have access to an avocado portfolio benefiting different lifestyles. The result is that there are still different quality grades of avocados in BAWCM today, in spite of the establishment of the national standard for national/international avocado quality.

The controversy around 'avocado quality' illustrates a contemporary tension between global and national commodity processes. The orientation of large national producers to achieve global quality standards to compete internationally exemplifies globalization from below. However, we can conclude that any attempt at standardizing quality can become a public issue since different interests, knowledge and practices socially construct food quality, and it is important to elucidate and analyse their social and political implications.

Recognizing the significance of quality-setting processes implies that quality discontinuities cannot always be overcome using the argument that quality standardization is a necessity to competing for distant markets within liberalized trade regimes. Indeed, quality conflicts often reinforce the existence of opposing world views and practices in terms of fresh food to access domestic markets or markets further afield. The quality setting represents an arena of knowledge within which different interests, visions and priorities are fought out.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the type of issues a social interactionist approach takes into account when studying quality standards. We have argued that in the analysis of these issues, a prime consideration must be the differing interpretations, social relations, and materialities of quality in 'real' markets and, therefore, subsequent negotiations and conflicts between different actors. We must reiterate that a view of the expansion of global quality standards as a 'negotiated order' and that is part of actors' encounters cannot do justice to all aspects of quality setting. We recognize that a purely interactionist approach cannot adequately analyse the political economy of quality standards, such as in relation to the Argentinian economic crisis, which severely affected fresh fruit and vegetable consumption. Our argument at the outset of this article was not that an interactionist approach could provide a total theory of quality, but rather that this perspective brings to the fore particular aspects of quality setting in a way that adds richness to existing debates and helps us to rethink the notion of the food value chain.

We submit that the requirements of global management elites are far removed from the experience of actors operating in functioning markets themselves. Global quality standards form a centralized approach to quality control, as an organizational model. The case of the wholesale market in Buenos Aires has been used to argue that there are several organizational trajectories at work in the construction of quality in functioning markets; thus global quality standards are just one expression of globally and locally situated relations. Our cases reveal that the relations and interactions revolving around food objects incorporate a social dynamic generated by

actors *in situ*, resisting the inroads of a global homogenization process that engulfs singular food markets around the world.

Thus, a social interactionist approach reveals the complexity of implementing global quality standards in local contexts, and it highlights the significance of multiple interpretations of and degrees of engagement of social actors with the global expansion of standards. This perspective allows for a more sophisticated interpretation of how the global scale of quality, social relations, institutions, disputed quality knowledge claims, and food aesthetics create new values and social commitments. These processes beget new types of agency and new materialities, such as those represented by the changing interpretation of quality at the BAWCM. This includes novel organizing practices at both the level of social interaction, the physical presence of the produce, information, and 'consumer communities' demanding quality; each shape retailers' perceptions of quality and the identities of segmented markets.

By problematizing quality standards, we situated quality considerations by actors to resolve issues of content, clientele, funding sources and innovations and, in effect, locate the issue of quality as a broad relational field within the globalization of food. In short, quality is part of a complex world that links produce attributes with social actors. The visual characteristics of fresh fruit and vegetables, together with their seasonality and geographical origin, become intertwined with social relationships that rely on social actors' knowledge to service lifestyles associated with different economic contexts. Thus, quality has multiple definitions: this article has shown how social encounters assemble global forms of retailing with local social constructions of business and entrepreneurship.

The formalization of global quality into a national standard is not easy to achieve and is potentially conflicting in nature. Indeed, as demonstrated through the controversy over avocado standards, quality is not only a set of normative procedures that serves to order the market, but an entry into further economic interests. The attempt to legitimize the new quality avocado for export opened up the political and social dimensions of quality, revealing how the government does not always defend the local differences of supply practices and food varieties. The national avocado standard points to how an amalgam is created out of local and global insights concerning the process of qualification of fresh fruit and vegetable.

Finally, in a more macro-sociological sense, our study at the BAWCM enriches the understanding of the larger social significance of quality in real markets. The emphasis on meaning and on the negotiations of meaning (successful or not) is used to look at the transformation of food supply and demand (markets) through social interactions and the way that different actors deal with circumstances such as the social effects of global quality standards. In this regard, understanding the practices of greengrocers disclosed their capacity to deal with bewildering quality criteria and the creation of an economy of variability (de Raymond, 2007). This phenomenon of the content of greengrocers' quality practices spilling over into global quality standard settings – with an attendant erosion of the authority of the global project – has generated considerable comment, and it has become fashionable, in terms of globalization from below as well as globalization from above (food governance), to bemoan the tendency that homogenization of every real world market is the work of a growing corporate financial elite.

Not denying the validity of specific instances of the work of corporate financial food interests towards actors in the market, we believe an interactionist approach allows for a more subtle understanding of quality demands/market segmentation

relationships than simple nostalgia for the self-autonomy of local entrepreneurs and markets. An interactionist sees real markets and food service providers existing in a dynamic relationship, with quality setting not only imposing changes in market practices but also responding to global quality standards in an active rather than a passive way. To fully understand the implications of the rise of global quality standards encroaching on local food entrepreneurs and on some producers categories, we have to examine not only the motives of the official government experts but also the meaning of these events to local entrepreneurs and to some categories of producers.

It may well be that some entrepreneurs and producers, for example large wholesalers and large producers oriented to international markets, welcome global quality standard development to a greater degree than other members, for instance greengrocers and small and medium-sized producers of fresh produce, for the reason that more traditional modes of quality attribution are no longer experienced as economically tenable. This thinking casts a different light on the possible relationship of food services with actors' affects about what quality is and their resistance to accept the operation of quality standards as a governance technique for food. Thus, global food retailers, through supermarkets chains, are not totally disembodied forms of global organizations. In other words, supermarkets are not only efficient organizations that reproduce unproblematically a global management model of the value chain. In fact, they are carriers of global procedures, the implementation of which generates emergent social interactions and a linguistic shift among local retailers towards consumer demands for quality as a new social category, requiring specialized provisioning of food services. The changes in national quality standards to accommodate global requirements of produce surface through local quality settings absorbed into mainstream food service networks – all our cases point to the contested role of quality that the providers of food services are playing in the erosion of the neoclassical representation of the single, integrated market as the official representation of economic organization.

Unevenly and ambivalently, at the BAWCM, social actors qualify and requalify fresh fruit and vegetables according to different individual knowledges, experiences and personal business acquaintances to supply consumer demand, and they confer legitimation on new forms of demanding quality produce. Again, we do not want to minimize the historical or contemporary regressiveness of much voluntary quality standardization and value food chain activities oriented to reduce varieties of food practices and produce (variety costs money and efficiency). But we must recognize this quality setting for the locus of contemporary food service provision interactions. They are generating heterogeneous assemblages where 'modern' and 'precise' food distribution procedures (large producers and supermarkets) coexist with a variety of other distribution circuits (greengrocers, wholesaler-distributor, institutional canteen), and see that for some the global quality standards contain genuine global market participation possibilities. In fact, it does not seem too stately to say that there seem to be virtually no important areas of social life in which struggles over quality meanings are not being played out in the diversity of retailer services to satisfy consumer demands and notions of quality.

Old forms of the standardization of food production and distribution are being challenged significantly, as organic enthusiasts, fair-trade and ethical-oriented food advocates confront the practices of the mainstream producers and retailers. At the other end of the consumption and material demand, there are similar confrontations over the most appropriate organization of food procurement, as a coalition of

consumers and advocates challenge the traditional mediation role of retailers in the market and search for a direct reconnection with food producers, their rural practices and their environment. In sum, the service provision of food appears to be the arena of some of the most basic events about quality occurring in post-standardized society now, and a social interactionist approach facilitates a way to comprehend the meaning and negotiations over quality standards.

Notes

1. This orientation draws freely from Dilley's attempt to develop an understanding of 'the market' from outside dominant narratives of market discourses. Thus, these 'voices' and 'conversations' situated in specific markets are central to address quality in particular 'physical' and 'geographical' settings. Thus quality is an 'aspect' of trade and the places where exchanges are conducted. This highlights quality as a course of action of trade and exchange with spatial and temporal situated properties (cf. Dilley, 1992).
2. <<http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O999-quality.html>>, accessed 14 July 2012.
3. Socially different aesthetics is based on inequality; it is an increasing global phenomena rooted in the shift from Fordism to flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1992). Thus, the segmentation of food supply and demands (i.e. the worlds of conventional and alternative food) can be seen as the world of different qualities. This is an extension and consequence of flexible accumulation, along the lines of consumers' income, time and information affordability.
4. For social aesthetics, see Highmore, 2010.

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