**Opinion piece by Steven Desair, social entrepreneur with a passion for food and ecology.**

**Founder of Eatmosphere, Mary Pop-in & Terroir. (Download text)**

As a result of the coronavirus epidemic, more and more people are buying their food from farmers through a “short chain”. In this way, they pay the farmer or producer directly, allowing the latter to determine the price themselves and thus manage the supply and demand. Consumers are likely to buy directly from farmers again because they want to eat healthier during this public health crisis, have time to think about where their food comes from and are eager to support the local economy in this difficult time. Short chains therefore only bring positives: you eat according to the seasons, which has less impact on our environment; it benefits your health because the seasonal vegetables and fruit contain the vitamins you need at that moment; you pay a fair price because there are no profit margins going to intermediaries; and it is much tastier because it is grown in season and you get to know your farmers again.

For example, I also enjoy a diverse range of vegetables from farmer Matthias, 30 years old and the fourth generation on the farm Seasonal flavour. A few years ago he decided to take a different path, opting for small-scale production and selling directly to the customer. Above all, he wanted to set his own prices again. This, as Matthias explains, was not possible when he had only a limited number of crops and sold his products through the auction. *"At the auction you hand over your products without knowing the price in advance. The inspector determines the price category based on aesthetic requirements. The auction room itself is governed by the laws of supply and demand. The price starts in a defined price category and decreases until one of the supermarket buyers accepts it. It is therefore a competition for buyers to keep the price as low as possible for supermarkets. For example, it often happened that an oversupply results in prices lower than the price of production. Unfortunately, consumers do not notice these price fluctuations and are therefore often unaware of the reality behind the price displayed on their ticket. They are probably paying the same price as always, but do not know that the farmers have received a much lower return for these products. As a farmer, you try to reduce the cost price by producing more. But it is clear that an oversupply will lower the price. It's a vicious circle.”* Matthias is happy to have chosen to leave this system, and I am convinced the difference shows. He chose greater economic security and stability. He chose quality instead of quantity. He chose freedom. (read more below the picture)

Today, his sales have increased by 200 % during this strange period. A nice result, isn't it? However, I still see Matthias scratching his head every week during this "heyday" period of the coronavirus. Doubling a farmer's sales figures is not as easy as 1 + 1 = 2. Other factors come into play. To understand, let's take a tour of Matthias’ farm. He literally does everything from A to Z. From administration, packaging, HR, sales, logistics, harvesting to sowing. Essentially, the structure of a large company compressed into an artisanal profession. When you're a small player you are forced to take on so many things, you just can't go twice as fast. The increase in turnover hurts this balance. And what does that 200% turnover mean if you can barely cover your costs? Matthias has eliminated intermediaries, such as auctions and supermarkets, in order to keep more margin for himself. But his costs have also increased because he manages everything himself. Suppose that the real cost to produce a leek is 1 euro but that he sells it for 80 cents. He already loses 20 cents per leek. You might think, just sell it at 1.50 euros. But that would mean a return to the law of supply and demand. And Matthias does not want to stray too far from supermarket prices, for fear of being labelled expensive. So he pays a hefty price for the limited freedom he bought in distancing himself from the auction process. His business struggles to compete with quantity and efficiency. It’s a David *vs* Goliath story.

Competing against multinationals with thousands of employees, where mathematical models determine purchasing and sales policies, is a bridge too far for Matthias' small economic model. The economy of scale dictates the law in this society. That influence is evident in the measures linked to the coronavirus which prohibit small farmers' markets but authorize large supermarkets that welcome 1,000 to 3,000 visitors per day. Two weights, two measures. Don't get me wrong, I understand of course that there are more and more mouths to feed. And it has to be affordable for everyone. Supermarkets and the industrial revolution in agriculture have been innovative solutions that meet this demand. However, with this development, many hidden flaws have crept into the process. The impact of pesticides on the environment and our health and are just two examples among many. Imagine if we could calculate the impact on our health and the cost of declining natural resources, then add these factors to the price of conventional products. Our food would become priceless. Wouldn't it be (financially) healthier to choose high-quality food that is accessible to everyone? (read more under the photo)

The "short chain" model can therefore play a crucial role in the transition to a different food system. However, these pioneering farmers need support in their growth.  Ideally, governments, research institutes, citizens and companies could consider the task alongside Matthias and thus support his quest to offer us tasty and healthy local food in a sustainable way, for the benefit of him, our society, our nature and our economy. Our efforts must also extend beyond the coronavirus crisis. Start looking for your seasonal farmer(s) already. Help them if you can. Appreciate their professional pride and passion. After all, they practice one of the oldest professions in the world. Regional farmers co-create our nature and our landscape, they stimulate tourism and the catering industry through the typical local products that define the identity of a region. Just think of the North Sea shrimp - caviar of the Belgians, the Boechout apple region, the Mechelen asparagus, the Geraardsbergen mattetaarten, the Brabant’s grondwitloof, ...It's time to give to these unsung heroes, these modern day Don Quixotes, the podium they deserve.

I'd like to give the final word to Matthias: “*As a company we don't want to use more land in the future, but we do want to make better use of the land, make optimal use of the seasons and the natural characteristics of the plants. Ultimately, the intention is that we, the smaller producers, will be able to feed the big cities. But for this, we not only need support from the consumer, but also from the government and municipalities. Only then can it be included in urban development plans and in government policy. I hope that in the future there will be a greater awareness among people of where their food comes from, how it is grown and why it is so incredibly important”*.

Bon appétit.

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