

SUGGESTIONS FOR CONSUMERS (part 2)

WHAT CAN WE DO? A LIST FOR THE PRESENT*

Since the Lussignani times (see forms 5 to 1) a lot of water and a lot of food (wasted) have gone under the bridges of growth, of development, of abundance, of feeling full. Nonetheless contradictions, unbalances, paradoxical situations have grown. There are as many starved people as there are obese people in the world, the food we waste could feed half of the world population. Natural resources, soil, water, energy, are limited and we use them so quickly that they don't have time to regenerate themselves. A world and a lifestyle unsustainable in the long run.

Starting from there, we can create a "modern" list of reasons, and then of actions and behaviours, against food, water and energy waste. Not an assertive and prescriptive decalogue but simply a memo, a list that could include these "elements" among others:

1. Not wasting food, water and energy means saving money and limited natural resources. Water is a vital good: everybody must have access to the minimum amount of water necessary to a human being. The same works for food which satisfies a primary human need. Energy is needed for everything, but must be produced in a more sustainable way and equally distributed. Food and water waste reduction is the most extraordinary and immediate energy source.
2. Acknowledging that food safety, availability of water and energy resources are two sides of the same coin: to get 1 kcal you need about 1 litre of water. Throwing away edible food means wasting the water that was used to produce it, transform it, distribute it and then dispose of it. And so all the energy used for these processes: to produce 1 kcal of food you need 10 kcal of fossil energy.
3. Don't squander, we eat the biggest part of water, we don't drink it: 50 litres are the minimum level recommended for household use (washing, cooking), the water consumption for our daily diet of 3000 kcal is 70 times higher. Behind the meals that we consume there are huge amounts of water.
4. Eating food with a low water impact: it takes 3600 litres of water a day for a meat based diet, 2300 for a vegetarian one. The Mediterranean diet uses less water and it's healthier. When we throw away 200 grams of red meat we waste 3000 litres of water that were mainly used to feed the animal.
5. Planning the shopping list based on real needs, without giving in to the thousands of special offers at the supermarkets.
6. Don't go shopping when you're hungry: you normally buy more than what's needed.
7. Read carefully the expiration dates of products and be aware of the distinction between "use by" and "use preferably by": in this case the product can be used also later on. Favour the products with less or no packaging.
8. For the great distribution: increase last minute sales for products close to their expiry date or with damaged packaging. Adopt last minute market or similar initiatives for unsold products and donate them to those who need them.

9. Use the leftovers or freeze them or use them as compost.
10. Not wasting means also taking care of yourself, of others and of your personal relations in relation to nature and the World: not “to waste life”, as in a Charles Bukowski poem.

There could be many more but let's mention at least two other:

11. Fostering the use and the culture of wine and doggy bag in restaurants, without embarrassment. Half portions should be a priority.
12. Nutrition education, without dogma or precepts, must be part of a larger program for community and environment education.

This is an on going list of course. But this list here could be applicable, if we aware and we want to do it. But why people don't do it? Or why is only a minority interested in the issue of waste? In order to translate words into facts we must promote a “new” consumer culture, and not only for food. We could call it “metaconsumption”: on one hand we must half the consumption, by selecting and choosing them responsibly. On the other, we must think beyond consumption itself, at least as it is normally intended.

We should start from the beginning, thinking about goods and productions systems, transformation and distribution. Goods should be more sustainable, that is we should fewer resources to produce them, they should last longer and be more “valuable”. For food and for everything else.

Motivation alone is not enough though; this cultural process should involve local administrators and politicians, so that this doesn't remain a personal action.

It must become a priority in our society. More levels need to be integrated: first of all the consumers, but also businesses, local administrators and then institutions and politics. Without institutional support we ran the risk of being stuck with good intentions only: if we want to communicate efficiently with the entire society, aiming at building a strong “ecological identity”, a synergic work is needed, one that will bring us to choose in a conscious and intelligent way the road to “metaconsumption”, meant as the first option and not as an imposed sacrifice.

* Resumed and revised by the book: Andrea Segrè (2012) Cucinare senza sprechi - Ponte delle Grazie, Milano