

Tasting Trust: Building Long-Term Support for Ecological Farming through Free Samples in Shanghai

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In this paper, I discuss the meaning of the seemingly ordinary practice of handing out free samples by ecological farmers, who grow produce without the use of synthetic agricultural inputs such as pesticides and herbicides, at farmers' markets. I show that free samples are not only a crucial marketing tactic but a critical means to connect peri-urban food producers to their urban target customers. Based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork at farmers' markets across Shanghai from September 2014 to September 2015, I examine the role of free samples in relationship-building between food producers and consumers. Given widespread concern over issues of food safety such as excessive levels of pesticide residue in food in China, establishing a relationship of interpersonal trust with potential customers is crucial to the economic success of the ecological farmers who do not have official organic certification. By having potential customers taste their produce, the farmers could give potential customers a better understanding of the differences between conventional and ecological produce. The farmers aimed to expose potential customers to flavours that reminded those old enough to remember a time before the widespread use of synthetic agricultural inputs and opened the eyes of those too young to remember flavours they never thought possible. I argue that offering free samples is not simply a sales tactic; in fact, these samples are goods that have a critical social role in building long-term relationships between ecological farmers and potential customers.

Introduction

On a warm October afternoon at the Our Piece of Ground Farmers' market during a quiet period, a farmer, Old Zhao said matter of factly, "The market for our produce is limited to big cities like Guangzhou, Beijing and Shanghai, where people are separated from farm production". Old Zhao's remark was based on the idea that urbanites are alienated from food production, which is very much the case with Shanghai due to the divisions between inner city Shanghai, the suburban districts and suburban counties. The alienation between food

producers and consumers makes large cities such as Shanghai a desirable market for ecological produce, which is grown without synthetic agricultural inputs such as herbicides and pesticides. On the other hand, in less urban places there was less of a need for the ecological farmers' produce, as local consumers would be directly connected to the producers of their food.

The need for a connection between consumers and food producers arises from the issue of food safety in contemporary food urban systems in which consumers are often alienated from food producers. This alienation has resulted in food safety concerns in China. In his study of food safety in China, Yan Yunxiang notes that as well as physical risk, food safety scares can also lead to erosion of trust across society (2012: 720). In the contemporary food system in China trust between consumers and distant food growers is being steadily eroded in the face of recurring food safety scandals giving rise to a desire for consumers, usually urbanites, to know where their food comes from. In a market where producers are willing to take any number of short cuts at the expense of consumers to increase their profits from replacing ingredients to excessive use of synthetic inputs to increase yields or production, consumer wariness and scepticism was not unjustified (Yan, 2012, 2015). Wang et al note that food safety ranks "among the top concerns of Chinese consumers" in polls conducted in the last decade (2007: 27). The lack of trust in the contemporary food system in China has led to increase demand for ecological food, which have been produced without the use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers. This demand has given rise to a new breed of farmers, who have given up white collar jobs in the city to grow produce without the use of synthetic agricultural inputs. These farmers gather every Saturday at farmers' markets to sell their produce directly to consumers. However, the question remains as to how the farmers gain the trust of passers-by and convince these potential customers that their produce is indeed grown without the use of synthetic agricultural inputs.

However, there were also consumers that did not trust certification, being aware that there have been instances where produce that had organic certification turned out to have synthetic inputs (See Thiers, 2005). In 2011, Wal-Mart closed thirteen of its stores in China for fifteen days after the Chongqing city government found that pork being sold as organic did not meet the appropriate labelling standards for organic food (Bradsher, 2011). The high premiums on ecological food also provide an incentive for opportunistic profiteering. Indeed when helping a farmer entertain farm visitors I spoke with one of the visitors about the issue of organic certification and trust and asked her about her thoughts on organic certification in China. She replied, “You can’t tell whether the labels are real, either.” This view is evident in surveys of consumers regarding food safety and their perceptions of organic food in China. Siriex et al found that many of their respondents were worried about chemicals in food when asked about conventionally produced food (2011: 674). They also found that a few of the consumers did not believe that organic food was “100% natural” and free of chemicals (2011: 675). In their survey of consumer intentions to purchase organic food, Chen and Lobo found that considerable confusion amongst Chinese consumers with recent food scandals had eroded their confidence in the credibility of organic food (2012: 303).

As a result of issues of food safety consumers are looking for ways to reconnect with food producers. The demand among consumers for a connection with where their food comes from is evident in promotional materials for food stuffs including packaging and promotional slogans connecting food to places that are even imaginary. Such images are designed to encourage potential customers to believe in the qualities of the food, in this case safety. In this paper I discuss the ecological farmers’ practice of handing out free samples at farmers’ markets and how they use these free samples to connect consumers to their farms. Based on 12 months of participant observation as a volunteer at farmers’ markets in Shanghai, I show how free samples are intended by the farmers to connect the person tasting the sample to the

farms from which the produce came, and in doing so earn the trust of consumers at farmers' markets. Before I turn to the free samples, I will show how farmers portray their farms to passers-by and potential customers at farmers' markets with the use of written and visual materials.

Flyers and Scrap Books: Creating an Image for the Farm

At the farmers market the farmers would all have information about their farms and farming methods to show potential customers at the farmers' markets with the aim of explaining how their produce was grown and demonstrating the ethos of their farming method. For example, a free range chicken farm called Heavenly Love, which is owned by metal trader and run by his parents in law, would have a scrap book with photos of their farm and their flock of chickens. They would explain their farming methods and how their chicken coup does not smell. Other farms would have leaflets to explain their farming practices to consumers. For example the bilingual flyer for Camelia Grove explains the methods the farmer used to grow rice. Camelia Grove is a mixed farm that grows vegetables, rice and also keeps flocks of chickens and ducks. It is run by former Sister Wang, a former military academy lecturer. Describing how the farm employs a flock of mallard to peck at weeds and pests while fertilising the fields at the same time. The following is the text from the English side:

Camelia Grove was founded in 2011, and consists of two farms, one in Nahui and another on Chongming Island. Our farm in Nahui is 19.4 mu, and mainly produces fruits and vegetables. The orchard also has ducks [chickens, actually]. Our farm on Chongming Island grows rice and we keep ducks in the rice fields.

The rice grown at Camelia Grove is a product of a natural nutrient cycle. After three years of experimentation our farm [on Chongming] is now able to grow a variety of fruits, vegetables and other produce without the use of synthetic chemicals. Weeding is carried out with our labour. The result is an increase in the quality of the land and soil.

Our ducks are a product of our farm's irrigation system, developed in 2013. The ducks eliminate pests and are a source of natural fertiliser for our crops, while the irrigation waterways give the ducks space to roam and insect pests provide an excellent source of food for the ducks. Rice grown in this natural nutrient cycle and the texture is far superior to rice that has been grown using synthetic fertiliser and pesticides.

The rice produce at Camelia Grove includes: white rice, brown rice and black rice. The rice in the photographs is packed in 2 catty (1KG) and 4 Catty (2.5KG) packs. Black rice needs to be vacuum packed, while white rice and brown rice does not need to be vacuum packed when kept in dry areas. Each of our 10 Catty gift packs includes 5 x 2 catty vacuum packs. We can provide 50 Catty bags or 20 Catty bags of rice by request, as vacuum packing is not necessary if the rice is consumed quickly and not kept too long.

The detailed description of the role of livestock on the farm in the first two paragraphs is designed to transport the reader to the farm and educate them about the farming practices at Camelia Grove. The reader should be assured that the food is grown without the use of synthetic agricultural inputs. However, with the increasing number of food safety scandals in China such narratives would sometimes only partially persuade passers-by at the farmers

market. Many potential customers require a more tangible connection to the farm, and one such connection is through taste. As the proverb goes, “the proof is in the tasting”.

Free Samples: A Taste of the Farm

Another common technique that the ecological farmers would use to attract customers at the farmers’ market was to offer free samples of their produce. At the market, farmers could familiarise passing consumers, who could be potential customers, by having them taste the produce, and building a rapport with them and educating them about how the produce is grown. The goal was to familiarise potential customers with their produce and prove that their produce tastes different and is indeed superior to conventional produce grown with synthetic inputs, and therefore earn the trust of passers-by and custom. However, free samples are not guaranteed to succeed. Some people may find that the taste is not to their liking.

Free samples were one of the tactics employed by farmers at the markets to gain regular custom by proving the quality of their produce. In his study of farmers’ market consumers in Ireland, Oliver Moore (2006: 424) found that the majority of consumers used taste as a metric for whether a farmers’ claims about their produce were trustworthy. Free samples offered at the farmers’ markets included prepared items such as the salted duck eggs, samples of seasonal produce such as tomatoes or a common favourite, homemade tofu from their own grown soy beans. Some of the farmers would even have their own grinder to mill dried soy beans to make fresh soy milk. The most ambitious was Camelia Grove. During the autumn of 2014 when I began my fieldwork, Sister Wang would offer samples of their sweet potatoes and rice milk, prepared in a room with a kitchenette that was provided by the venue.

The farmers wanted consumers to taste the superior quality of their produce in comparison to conventional produce at the supermarket. The farmers hoped that the taste of

the samples would convince passers-by that ecological produce was superior to conventional produce, as it tasted more flavoursome than produce grown with synthetic inputs. Some farmers reported that consumers of a certain age could recall the same taste in vegetables grown before wide spread use of synthetic pesticides, fertilisers and herbicides. A founder of one of Shanghai's first eco farms, who had left the industry, shared with me, "We would grow peppers and customers would say, 'wow these peppers taste like the ones from my childhood' when they tried them. I remember a time in Inner Mongolia before the use of synthetic inputs and that's what our peppers taste like." Many older consumers still had memories of a time before synthetic inputs were widely used in agriculture and how the produce used to taste, while younger consumers were impressed by the extra flavour in ecological produce that they have not tasted in conventional produce. According to Sister Wang customers as young as toddlers favoured the taste of her produce over conventional produce.

Even in the face of price competition from other farmers at the farmers' market Camelia Grove was able to regain customers, who had switched to other farmers who charged lower prices. Indeed, there was one occasion when Sister Wang's older sister, Big Sister Wang, who was helping with sales and customer service at Camelia Grove, forgot to reserve new season corn for a regular customer, who became upset and stopped buying from them. I asked Big Sister Wang about her, "What happened to the skinny girl that would come every week to pick up produce from you?"

"She stopped coming because I forgot to save some corn for her when she asked for it. Also, I think she's been comparing our prices to some of the other stalls like Old Zhao's and she's buying from him instead."

About a month later, Big Sister Wang bumped into her and I left them to chat while I carried things to Big Sister Wang's car after the market at Big Horizon Plaza. I was keen to

find out what came of the encounter from Big Sister Wang. “So what did she say?”

“Oh, she said she would come by and get some things from me next time.”

“So she’s not buying from Old Zhao anymore.”

It seemed that this customer had tasted Old Zhao’s produce and found it to be inferior in flavour compared to Camelia Grove’s.

The taste of the farmers’ produce is a means of building relationship with regular customers of the farmers’ market such as Kelly. She was a frequent visitor to the farmers’ market where she would buy the ecological farmers’ produce because she felt that the produce tasted of themselves, and for her it was important since she could not add too much seasoning when cooking due to her husband’s illness. Kelly would often hang around the farmers’ market and chat with the farmers. Kelly was informed and engaged about the nutritional content and benefits of food stuffs and appreciated the benefits of ecological food. When she found out that I was a doctoral researcher, she asked me to recommend some reading materials about food. The farmers aspired to build the type of relationship that they shared with Kelly when handing out free samples.

Handing out free samples did not always work and there was always the chance that consumers would taste the sample and form a negative impression of the farmer, as a result. For example, Big Sister Wang would make salted eggs, curing the mallard eggs from the farm in a salt brine, and bring them to sell at the market offering small pieces as samples. While my friends and I were among the many consumers who enjoyed the taste, there would also be some consumers who would scrunch up their faces and complain about how salty they were.

Yet, some customers can taste the difference between ecological produce and conventional produce, and consumers who can taste the difference. Familiarity builds trust, and tasting the food familiarises consumers with the flavour, and if they can taste the

difference the flavour can be a sign of distinction between ecological produce and conventional produce (Luhmann, 1988). The flavour of ecological food can prove the competence of the farmers at growing food without the use of synthetic inputs (Barber, 1983).

Conclusion

By offering free samples, the majority of the farmers aimed to demonstrate the superior flavour of their produce and therefore legitimise their claims that their produce is grown without synthetic inputs. This was achieved by connecting urban consumers not only with the farmers in front of them, but with the farms. From the farmers' point of view the goal was for these passers-by to eventually become customers and form a bond of familiarity with the farmers and return regularly to future farmers' markets to buy produce from them, or better still ordering delivery boxes from them.

By combining written materials such as flyers and scrap books with narratives about their farming practices the farmers are attempting to connect alienated urban consumers to actual farms, the farms that they the farmers run. Free samples offer an important tangible connection between urban consumers and food producers such as the ecological farmers. Tasting free samples gives consumers a tangible sense of the farmers' ethos in farming reinforcing the narrative differentiating ecological produce from conventional produce that is presented in written material such as brochures. In doing so the farmers are connecting urban consumers to their farms through the taste of their produce. Furthermore, consumers who grow to appreciate the taste of ecological produce such as Kelly become friends with farmers and share a relationship with them that goes beyond transactional relations in the marketplace. However, this connection only works when the taster enjoys the flavour of the free sample. A negative impression of the free sample will only serve to keep the passer-by alienated from the farmer and their farm.

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