



AN INTERNATIONAL
KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE
INITIATIVE ABOUT FOOD
& FOOD SYSTEMS

/ Denmark /

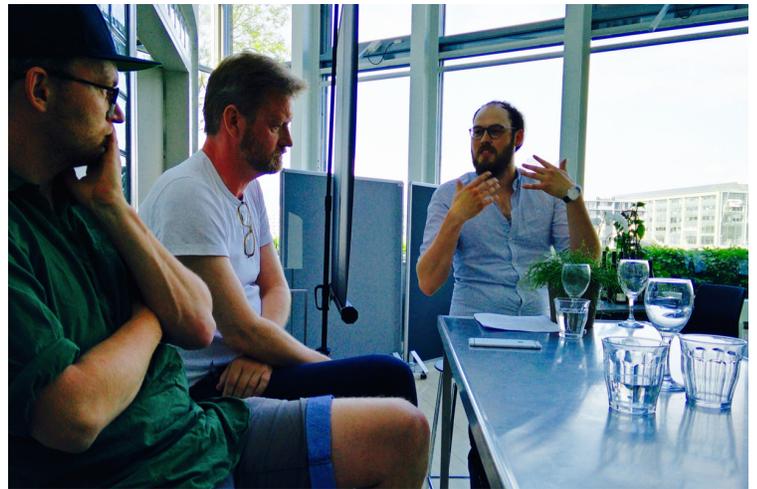
Copenhagen

What Happens When You Try to Go 'Beyond' Organic?

On May 25, 2016, [Aalborg University](#) and [Kitchen Collective](#) hosted a round-table discussion on the successes and failings of organic food in Denmark. The event was a collaboration with Slow Food Copenhagen-North Zealand, and was aimed at unpacking a few questions about whether “organic” has become a kind of glass ceiling for food producers and consumers. It also raised many other questions about control, responsibility, access, and who the discourse about “high-quality” actually serves.

From CPH Slow Food leader (and UNISG alumnus) Johan K. Dal:

Is organic the ultimate achievement for Danish food, or are there more ways to think about what is 'good', when it comes to our food? Over the past decade, organic food has exploded. The organic label, Red Ø, recently celebrated its 25-year anniversary, and Danes purchase more organic products per capita than anywhere in the world. Copenhagen is home to the first-ever organic-certified Michelin-starred restaurant, Relæ, and its municipal government incorporates 90% organic produce into all public catering. But is too much emphasis put on organic and chemical inputs? What other factors contribute to good? And what comes next? Through talking and eating, this event was about drawing attention to the ways in which aesthetics, power relations, harmony, ethics, and social sustainability each contribute to making food good.



Johan facilitated an initial discussion among the panelists (Torsten B. Jacobsen, of Nordic Foodworks and Copenhagen Food Space; Maya Hey from the Nordic Food Lab, and another (!) UNISG alumna; Mathias Skovmand-Larsen, a food scientist and hobby farmer; and me), after which a lively conversation ensued with the thirty-five participants. We also drank some nice natural wines, ate a fantastic plate of barlatto and salad, courtesy of [Average Meatballs](#), and did just a little bit of socializing, too... (including with UNISG alums Edith Salminen, Giulia Guazzotti, and Nicoline Jensen).

There were no conclusions, of course. When such a complex and layered subject is at stake, there had better not be. But some of the offers (and further questions) were as follows:

– When it comes to labeling, marketing, and interpreting *organic* (i.e., its discourse), food theory has an important role to play. There's no need to be dismissive of theory as abstract or 'imaginary'—it always goes hand in hand with practice, like the way a city map helps figure out what street you're walking down, and how walking in a given place can help improve the next version of the map. That what gastronomy does.



– How can *micro* food practices change our thinking and doing when it comes to perceptions of the *macro* scale of things? What does the edibility and tastiness of food tell us that a label cannot?

– When things are small (like microbes) or invisible (like labeling processes), they can evoke fear or confusion. Instead of fearing these unknowns, get to know them instead: Dive in! Participate! (that is, in the making of food, in the policies, in the labeling systems...)

– Organic can be beneficial in many ways—for flavor, soil health and farm-perimeter biodiversity, for reducing chemical inputs to bodies, and for increasing profit, badge value, and feel-good attributes. But we need to be attentive to what organic labeling also cuts out of the picture, such as foraged foods and time for innovation, which often gets put aside in favor of protecting one's (costly) organic certifications.

– What about thinking about 'before organic' and 'early organic'? Over time, the values associated with the word organic have changed. They are not fixed, but have evolved. Early organic food was often not-so-nice, not more flavorful, and frequently a bit old or going bad (especially if you bought it from a low-turn-over outlet). And before the industrial and green revolutions, *all* food was organic, the soil was healthy, and we had a much closer idea of who produced the foods we bought, and how. There's no going back, obviously, but these historic markers can indicate some of the signposts for how we go forward.

– Language and naming are complex processes. Those who have the knowledge and authority to participate in those processes are the people who wield power within food systems. Who is being left out of this conversation, either because of specific or systemic exclusion? We need to increase the granularity of the ways in which we talk about food, but we also need to increase the number and range of people who have the 'authority' to do so.

– What would an open-source labeling system look like? Or a phased system—that is, simplified labels and language for a period of time (to gain consumer engagement), which are then complexified afterwards?



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