

Learning towards solidarity-based food distribution systems

Croatian visit (17th-20th July 2014)

Report by Francesco Neri and Alison Kennedy

Thursday, 17th

The meeting was in Pula city center, at the Kunstcafé Cvainer. We had just the time to begin to know the other participants, while everybody was coming, and then we moved to a restaurant to have dinner all together.

Friday, 18th

The first visit was to OPG Komic, a small farm where the main crop is herbs, with a main emphasis on traditional Istrian species. The farmer is mainly growing lavender, sage, rosemary, helichrysum and olives. He also keeps bees, just a few beehives, mainly to improve pollination and to have beeswax available for preparing cosmetics. He's not particularly interested in honey production, so far, but he's open to it.

He runs the business together with his wife, and they found a good way to split up the different tasks and activities needed in the farm. They sell the products directly to the consumer, mainly through local markets and the CSA they're part of. Their main products are essential oils and different cosmetics (skin creams, lotions, balms). It's all made by them from the rough material to the final product, as they gradually bought the machines needed for the different stages of the process. He's a big fan of hand tools, and was especially proud of what he defined his most important device: the sickle, used for harvesting the precious herbs. Another very important tool for him is the rototiller, used 3 times a year mainly to turn the soil in order to control weeds. He doesn't use any pesticide or herbicide, trying to keep the plants as healthy as possible.

They manage to get 85% of their income thanks to the trade, whereas the remaining 15% comes from workshop they run in schools.

It was really interesting to see how such a small business manages to get a decent income through a land-based economical activity, run in a quite small surface.

The second place we visited, close to Rovinj, was the organic farm of Damir Janušić. Damir is a very creative person, his vision is to create a place where people visiting the area could find a sustainable accommodation, a camping place where also some bungalows are available. He's personally building these bungalows, using second-hand or recycled material. The place is full of interesting structures (the house and the little garden around it, the gazebo, the oven, the green house), all built by Damir and other people living on the farm, mainly using stuff found in the bin. A

lot of food is also grown here, mainly vegetables, herbs, olives and a bit of fruits. The garden looks a little bit “wild”, but also we have to admit that, once you started walking through it, paying more attention to the plants, you see there's a good balance with the weeds. Also, it's pretty amazing the amount of vegetables they have in the field, despite the messy appearance. Some very interesting variety and very good quality.

The vegetables are produced for the needs of the farm, but also there are 18 families who gets food from this place. They are free to come and pick up what they want, weekly, and there's only one general price: 10 kunas (about 1,2 euros) per kilo, whichever vegetable they might harvest. Damir was really proud to tell us how he decided to keep the price low and fair (especially for the customer) in order to give the chance to people to eat healthy without paying too much. He doesn't seem to be too concerned by the small profit he makes out of it, on the contrary, he looks pretty happy.

Some interesting detail, from a growing point of view, is that Damir hasn't used any manure or fertilizer in the last 5 growing seasons. All he does is to cut the plants at the end of the season, using a ripper to “cut” the soil, and just leave these plants on the surface, to mulch the soil and to feed it. This method is working quite well for him. Also, he told us he found out the main cause for a very common disease of tomato plants: blossom end rot (called also “black-bottom”): seeds saved in the wrong way. He reckons you can avoid that just by selecting plants with less serious problem and properly saving the seeds, that is letting it rot in the flesh of the fruit and saving it after that. The thin membrane which is formed around the seed could help avoiding this problem.

Visiting the farm was very motivating and a very valuable experience, also because of the extremely warm and friendly atmosphere that was there.

After these two visits, we went to the beach in the most southern part of the Istrian peninsula, the wonderful Gornji Kamenjak, and after that we had a late-evening dinner.

Saturday, 19th

The first visit of the day is at the field of Daniel Balaban. He runs a small market garden, started just a few years ago, and he was one of the founder of a CSA in Pula.

The field is just nearby Pula, surrounded by fields of conventional agriculture. For this reason, to be certified organic, he needs at least a 15 meters-wide barrier between his fields and the surrounding ones. The land is rented, and it's about 7000 square meters. We also had the chance to meet briefly the owner of the fields, a very interesting guy very concerned about yoga and healthy food -after a few minutes we were talking he tried to convince us of becoming vegetarian! Luckily for Daniel, the deal they have is that the rent is paid with the vegetables he produces.

So far he's managing to provide vegetables to 60 families, and to deliver part of the production to Rijeka and Porec, where there are other CSAs. Daniel works with two other people, young guys who he managed to involve in the project. So far, he manages to pay them monthly, whereas he doesn't really have an income out of this activity, but he kept the job he was doing before starting the growing activity. Daniel told us a bit about the main challenges of his activity, and we had a big discussion about how to involve the customers and to make them know what lies behind the vegetable production.

After that, we harvested vegetables for lunch and we drove to Šumber, on the eastern part of Istrian peninsula. Here there is a dairy farm called Drijade, run by a very energetic woman. There are 12 hectares of land owned by her, 50 hectares of county land, of which 10 hectares can be cultivated.

It was really interesting to hear the whole story of her life, how she got to this place, what she did first, and what finally the land "told" her it was right to do. After experimenting with a few different things, she realized this type of land is perfect for keeping goats, as it's pretty rocky, uneven and very wild. There are 69 goats currently living on the farm (French alps milk goats), two traditional Istrian cows (Boškari), 5 horses, one dalmatian donkey, a couple of Vietnamese pigs, three dogs, three cats and 25 chickens. She gets milk from the goats, and she produces yogurt and cheese out of that. She stressed a lot the importance of respecting the animals and their needs (in terms of food, social life, spaces), and she also gave us a really interesting insight of how little customers seem to know about the role of animals in agricultural systems. Apparently many customers hardly accept that in order to produce milk you need to kill calves pretty regularly (or to sell them so that someone else kills them), for example. She also doesn't like this, neither she likes to physically do that. But after many years running the farm she realizes this is part of the whole cycle, and to raise animals in order to get any product means to kill some of them to keep the system going. Apart from this, she's also very proud to keep some animals who are not producing anything, but "they just live on the farm", like the horses and the pigs. She considers them as other living beings part of the farm's population. In her vision this is a place where people can come and get to know better and more closely animals and the way they live, without cages or barriers -most of her animals just live free wandering around the farm!

In the afternoon we had a World Cafe session on Challenges in CSA with members of local CSA groups. This is a special Open Space Technology technique where different people from different groups and have to discuss a topic for a limited amount of time, writing down what comes out. When the time is over, people have to leave the group they were in and join another one, in order to mix people every round and to have different discussions and point of views changing constantly. The main aim was to gather common issues CSA groups are facing then combining them with our collective ideas to find the answers and strategies. It was pretty interesting to hear what different

people experience in their own countries, what the differences are but also what is commonly happening in a similar way to everybody despite the different parts of Europe we're from.

Sunday, 20th

The final day we had a session for evaluating the program, and a final informal closing round with suggestions, observations, and any possible contribution we felt like giving to the organizing team.