



# Time for Food

Everyday Food and Changing Meal Habits  
in a Global Perspective

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# Organic Food in the Canteen: Perceptions of Organic Food among Cadets in Norwegian Defence

Gun Roos

## Introduction

This paper, based on qualitative focus group data, explores perceptions of organic food among cadets in Norwegian Defence after organic food was introduced by the army food services in 2007.

In Norway, everyday meals are normally consumed at home, but lunch is an exception to this as many Norwegians eat lunch at work or in school.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, a Norwegian lunch consists of 'cold food', such as sandwiches, accompanied by some vegetables and fruit, and a beverage, often brought from home and eaten in the company of colleagues or schoolmates.<sup>2</sup> Although collectively organised food provisioning has become more common in workplaces and sometimes also in schools, the eating of lunch in out-of-home contexts is still less widespread in Norway today than in Finland and Sweden, for example.<sup>3</sup> However, some institutions in Norway, such as the military and hospitals, have had experience of the provision of publically subsidised and organised food services, over a long period of time. Norwegian Defence serves food to approximately ten thousand personnel every day and has over fifty kitchen units for the preparation of meals. In recent years, Norwegian Defence has focused on increasing the use of fruit, vegetables, and organic food, in its canteens/mess halls.<sup>4</sup>

Food and sustainability, as well as local and organic food, are matters which are gaining increasing attention among both food producers and consumers, and several political measures have been taken as a response to the ongoing global environmental crisis. The public food and procurement service has been seen as a promising arena in which an increase in organic agriculture and organic food consumption could be encouraged.<sup>5</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Holm, L., 'The Social Context of Eating', in Kjærnes, U., (ed.), *Eating Patterns. A Day in the Lives of Nordic Peoples. SIFO Report 7* (2001): 159-98.

<sup>2</sup> Mäkelä, J., 'The Meal Format', in Kjærnes, *op. cit.*, 2001, 125-58. Bugge, A.B., *Ungdommens Skolematvaner – Refleksjon, Reaksjon eller Interaksjon* ('Young People's School Lunch Habits – Reflection, Reaction or Interaction'), *SIFO Report 4*, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Kjærnes, *op. cit.*, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Stenberg, P., 'Økologisk mat i Forsvaret' ('Organic Food in Defence'), Presentation at 'God Mat - økologi, ernæring, bærekraft' ('Good Food – Organic, Nutrition, Sustainability'), Luftkrigsskolen, Trondheim, 15-16.9. 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan, K., Sonnino, R., *The School Food Revolution. Public Food and the Challenge of Sustainable Development*, London 2008.

Norwegian government is aiming to increase the scale of organic output, and the rate of organic food consumption, to fifteen per cent by 2020. This is an ambitious goal which requires targeted initiatives and measures, because in 2008, only five per cent of total agricultural land in Norway was used for the purposes of organic production, and sales of organic food accounted for only one per cent of total food sales.<sup>6</sup> However, studies show that this situation is changing as sales of organic food increased by twenty-five per cent between 2007 and 2008.<sup>7</sup>

The Norwegian Agricultural Authority has funded various projects in order to support the conversion of agricultural output to organic production and to raise an awareness of organic food among consumers. One of the projects which received funding from the Authority was a pilot scheme aimed at the inclusion of organic food in military provisioning. Norwegian Defence introduced the project in certain divisions and, by 2007, organic food was being served in six of its mess halls. Its aim was to increase the provision of organic food in its canteens to fifteen per cent by 2010 – a goal which was achieved. The military also set out to increase knowledge about organic food among cadets and employees, and to reduce meat intake. In addition, courses and study tours concerning organic food were arranged for the canteen employees, and information about organic food was provided on TV screens and food trays in the mess halls.<sup>8</sup> A small-scale survey carried out in 2008 among the soldiers suggested that attitudes to the serving of organic food in the mess halls varied, with fifty per cent signalling a positive attitude towards it, while thirty per cent were neutral, and twenty per cent had a negative attitude towards organic food.<sup>9</sup>

In order to successfully implement changes in food services, it is necessary to take account of consumers' views and to listen to users' opinions and perceptions concerning the proposed changes. Thus, in exploring perceptions of organic food among a group of Norwegian cadets, this paper takes account of the dominant discourses used by the cadets when they talk about organic food. In order to do this it was necessary to consider the following questions: What discourses do cadets utilise when they talk about organic food? Do the

<sup>6</sup> FiBL, Organic-world.net. Global Organic Farming Statistics and News (2010); available at URL <http://www.organic-world.net>; accessed 10.6. 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Terragni, L., Torjusen, H., Vittersø, G., 'The dynamics of Alternative Food Consumption: Contexts, Opportunities and Transformations', *Anthropology of Food* 55 (2009); available at URL <http://aof.revues.org/index6400.html>; accessed 10.6. 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Stenberg, *op. cit.*, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> Sørum, H., *Økologisk mat i Forsvaret – soldatenes holdninger til økologisk mat og landbruk* ('Organic Food in Norwegian Defence – The Soldiers' Attitudes to Organic Food and Agriculture'), Bachelor thesis, Akershus University College 2008.

cadets' perceptions reflect the fact that organic food has been introduced into the mess halls? What justifications for use or non-use of organic food do cadets give when discussing organic food?

### **Material and Methods**

As part of the European project 'Innovative Public Organic Food Procurement for Youth' (iPOPY) consumer perceptions were explored by conducting focus groups with young people who used public food services. The main aim of the iPOPY project was to study how an increased consumption of organic products might be achieved by the implementation of relevant strategies and instruments linked to public food-serving outlets for young people in the participating European countries – Denmark, Finland, Italy and Norway.<sup>10</sup> The iPOPY project focused on conducting and analysing the outcomes of case studies concerning the public serving of organic food to young people, and Norwegian Defence was selected for one of the Norwegian cases studies.

The author contacted Norwegian Defence, which recruited cadets for two focus groups, in the fall of 2008. One focus group was based at the Air Force Academy in Trondheim, which served organic food in its mess halls. It was involved in the pilot project which was funded by the Norwegian Agricultural Authority. The second focus group was based at the Military Academy in Oslo, which did not serve organic food. The focus group participants in Trondheim, which consisted of one female and four male participants, were aged between twenty-one and thirty-two years of age. The group in Oslo was comprised of six males, aged between twenty-four and twenty-seven years. The interview guide for use with the focus groups included the following main themes: the meaning of food for the focus group participants, food in the military, organic food, and sustainable development. When introducing the themes of organic food and sustainable development to the groups, the participants were first asked to write down what they themselves understood by these terms before they were discussed by the whole group. The opinions of the focus groups were digitally audio-recorded and the resulting recordings were later transcribed verbatim.

This paper relies on discourse analysis<sup>11</sup> in its approach to analysing the transcripts of discussions with the focus groups in order to explore the dominant discourses utilised by the cadets in talking about organic food and food served in the military canteens. Discourses are explanatory theories,

<sup>10</sup> Løes, A-K., Nölting, B., 'Increasing Organic Consumption through School Meals – Lessons Learned in the iPOPY Project', *Organic Agriculture* (2011): 1, 647-53.

<sup>11</sup> Gee, J.P., *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis, Theory and Method*, London 2005.



often difficult to articulate, that people rely on when they communicate about different matters with each other.

### **Food in the Mess Hall**

Many of the cadets who formed part of the focus groups lived on campus and were served breakfast, lunch and dinner in the mess hall, but a few of the cadets lived off campus and brought their own lunch with them each day. The cadets who took their meals in the mess hall stated that they tend to eat what is served and seemed to trust that the food provided meets their dietary needs ('we get our needs met, needs of nutrients and minerals and vitamins'). There was some discussion about personal preferences for dinner dishes, but it was concluded that within the context of the public food procurement services it was not relevant because it was not possible to fulfil individual food preferences in a mess hall context. Variation and choice (lunch served as a buffet, for example) were seen as especially positive aspects of the food service, and the food was, according to the cadets, reasonably priced.

The Air Force Academy in Trondheim has a reputation for serving very good food and this was also mentioned in the focus group discussion. Several aspects of the Trondheim Academy food service were especially mentioned, such as the wide choice of dishes available, the hotel-like buffet which was served, the positively motivated kitchen staff, the organic food provided, the small mess hall, and a long lunch break. One of the cadets, who rarely ate lunch in the mess hall, did not find it easy to justify why he did not do so, but he did draw on the Norwegian tradition of bringing your own packed lunch and on an efficient use of time:

I think it's quite all right to bring a packed lunch; it takes a lot of time off your lunch break to go to the mess hall and to eat a meal. It's all right to just sit and read or to be on the computer while you're eating.

### **Organic Food**

Although the cadets had been informed when they were recruited to the focus group that the topic of discussion would be organic food, this was not mentioned much by them when they talked generally about the food served in the mess hall. Just a few mentioned organic food, but without much elaboration:

The food is known to be very good at the Air Force Academy with more focus on organic food lately, and a varied diet; meals have an inspiring variation. I am very satisfied.

When they were asked if they thought that the goal of having organic food reach fifteen per cent of the total food served in the mess hall, had had any effect on them, vis-à-vis their attitude to organic food, they replied that they were not aware of any such effect. They also stated that, generally speaking, they did not buy organic food:

... at best [if we eat organic food] we get maybe a tiny, tiny, tiny bit less of substances that are not very good for us. That may happen at best. But of course you notice that people eat organic [food] because it says organic everywhere when the food is organic. But whether it tastes differently, I don't know; anyway if it does, it is only to a tiny degree.

On the basis of the written assignment undertaken by the focus groups which requested that they 'write down what you understand by organic', we can conclude that there was no common simple definition of organic products to be found among them. Their understanding of organic food includes the following ideas (see also Table 1):

- that it was cultivated without the use of artificial substances (for example, fertilisers)
- that vegetables were not sprayed with 'poisons' (to prevent insects etc.)
- that organic food cultivation requires a larger acreage for cultivation than conventional food cultivation
- that it was more expensive to buy
- that it was better for the environment?

The participants in the focus group tended to view organic food as being different from conventional food, and their descriptions reflected an expectation that organic food is better – for themselves, for animals, and for

*Table 1. Cadets' perceptions of organic food based on the written assignment: 'Write down what you understand by organic'. N = Number of cadets who have included different perceptions of organic food in their responses.*

Perceptions of organic food	Air Force Academy (N=5)	Military Academy (N=6)
Production without pesticides, fertilisers, etc.	3	4
Healthy	3	4
Environmentally friendly, linked to nature	3	3
Good for animal welfare		4
High price	5	2
Fashion, trend	2	1
Limited choices and availability	1	1
Different taste	2	2
Small size	1	

the environment, and/or that it tastes better. Earlier research on reasons for buying or consuming organic food, and barriers against doing so, had produced similar opinions and issues, that is, that organic food is healthier, that it tastes better, and that it is better for the environment and animal welfare; conversely, the high prices charged for it has been found to be the main barrier against a wider degree of consumption of it.<sup>12</sup>

### **Justifications and Discourses Used when Talking about Organic Food**

Different types of ambivalence concerning organic food emerged during the discussions with the focus groups. The excerpt below shows that organic food, like food in general, was often linked to health, but some of the cadets expressed doubt about that and wondered if it was in fact healthier to eat than conventional food. Organic food was also viewed as being more natural and environmentally friendly. However, questions were raised about whether there was evidence to support these claims, and also about price and a willingness to pay the higher cost of organic food:

I think we are now in a period in which, if something new appears, then the focus is on that. It is exactly the same, with spelt, for example. It is just b-----t and all the chefs say that it is not healthier at all. Thus, it is in focus, and what is in fashion now is to eat organic food, and, in addition, it is very expensive. You can go to the shop and check, should I take this or that, and compare the price. It wouldn't occur to me to pay so much to buy organic food because it is too expensive.

Question: It is expensive?

Yes it is.

Question: What do the rest of you think about price?

I totally agree; I don't pay anything extra ... to get organic. If I buy a litre of milk, conventional or organic, I don't taste the difference. I don't think I get less sick or live longer by drinking the organic [milk]. So I don't really see a reason to do it.

<sup>12</sup> Torjusen, H., Sangstad, L., Jensen, K.O., Kjærnes, U., *European Consumers' Conception of Organic Food: A Review of Available Research*, SIFO Professional Report No. 4, 2004. Hughner, R.S., McDonagh, P., Prothero, A., Shultz, C.J., Stanton, J., 'Who are the Organic Food Consumers? A Compilation and Review of Why People Purchase Organic Food,' *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* (2007): 6, 94-110.



If someone were to bring you factual information about how much it saves the environment, would it make any difference to your opinion?

Yes. If they could prove [that eating organic food has] really significant effects on the environment, I would have done it. But I don't think anybody has done that?

Yes there is a limit...

Yes of course if it is...

How much more expensive does it have to be for you to bother?

If it's a couple of crowns per litre of milk, then it's okay. If it's double the price then I don't think I would buy it.

It also has to be in proportion to how much it saves the environment, huh.

The cadets' descriptions of organic food also relied on discourses of food as identity, stating: 'you have a belief in what is right for you and then you do that. That is fair enough', and 'if you believe that it is good for the environment, then I think it's really tight when a customer is in the shop, and buys a basket-full of food, but only the milk is organic. You should go to the shop and buy all organic commodities, that's the way I see it. You cannot go halfway'. The aspects of value and thrift also figured in their discourse ('I don't pay anything extra so as to get organic [food]'), which they often used as justifications for why they had not changed the kind of food they eat and why they do not buy organic food.

### Seeking Balance

Two dominant discourses relating to organic food were identified in the interviews: healthism and moral virtue. Healthism is a socio-cultural phenomenon typical for Western middle class societies and characterised by strong health awareness and healthy lifestyle choices.<sup>13</sup> Healthism was the dominant consideration when the cadets talked about (organic) food, as they desire to be healthy, and organic food is associated with a healthy diet. Thus, in order to justify why they did not choose to buy organic food, the cadets questioned whether organic food really is healthier and safer, or whether this claim was just part of a marketing strategy. In addition to health matters, organic food is also linked to other moral virtues, such as environmental

<sup>13</sup> Greenhalgh, T., Wessely, S., "'Health for Me": A Sociocultural Analysis of Healthism in the Middle Classes', *British Medical Bulletin* (2004): 69, 197-213.



issues that have gained high moral status in recent times. In the discussions, cadets were asked directly about organic food and sustainable development – which made it hard for them not to respond. The discussions reflected their need to justify and to explain why they had not started doing the ‘right thing’ by favouring organic food. Some of the cadets raised questions concerning evidence purporting to show that organic food was the healthier option, while others referred to price or taste, and still others defended conventional food, by stating: ‘I think that there is too much focus on organic food, I feel that normal food has almost become taboo and that organic [food] is seen as the only right thing [to eat]’.

The cadets’ justifications seem to reflect an underlying structuring idea of balance and balancing. The following excerpt illustrates balance as an underlying structure and how it is related to context. When asked if they talk about organic food with friends, the immediate response was ‘no’, but one of the cadets stated:

It happens sometimes in the shop with my girlfriend. We may have a quick discussion to see if we will buy organic or conventional milk... The discussion is a little bit about price and a little bit about environmental friendliness, and what we think about these issues... But we have figured out that it really makes no difference. What counts against organic food is price and what counts for it is environmental friendliness.

Balancing has been related to universal exchange rules and the fundamental human need for social belonging.<sup>14</sup> Rick Wilk<sup>15</sup> has suggested that people seek balance in different ways and along different time-scales. He describes moral balancing using a see-saw metaphor, and points out the paradoxical effect of the see-saw metaphor by using organic food as an example: ‘When the price of organic fruit suddenly goes up, we might maintain our consumption and seek balance (by actually consuming more hamburgers, or other ‘sinful’ products). Or we might decide that organic food is really not much better for you, so eating it should not count as a virtue, or we might even redefine it as luxury that should be counted as a sinful indulgence. Note the paradoxical effect of the see-saw metaphor. When we are convinced that organic food is really “good” and then buy it, we also consume more “sinful” food; then when we consume less virtue, we also can consume less “sin”’.

<sup>14</sup> Borch, A., ‘Balancing Rules. Gambling Consumption at Home’, in Kingma, S.F., (ed.), *Global Gambling: Cultural Perspectives on Gambling Organizations*. New York 2010, 195-210.

<sup>15</sup> Wilk, R., ‘Consumption Embedded in Culture and Language: Implications for Finding Sustainability’, A Paper Presented at the Seminar ‘Energy is a Social Good: New Perspectives on Sustainable Consumption’, University of Oslo, 2010.

This study demonstrates that by asking cadets to talk about organic food, insights can be gained into discourses that serve to shape and constrain their perceptions of organic food. Despite being a small-scale study with mainly male participants, it does offer insights into how people might position themselves in relation to organic food in everyday eating situations. The seeking of balance is drawn upon when talking about issues related to organic food and eating.