

Why it's time to stop romanticising where our food comes from

Using rolling green hills and picturesque cows in marketing does little to tell consumers about the journey from farm to fork

Beth Hoffman

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A buffalo walks slowly through the fog of the shower area, while several others vie for position under giant roller massagers. Their diet is purely organic, grown on Tenuta Vannulo Organic Farm's 100 hectares of land and fertilized by buffalo manure. The animals eat when they want, are milked when they want, and, as a result of their stress-free lifestyle, this buffalo milk is some of the most valuable in all of southern Italy. Every drop of it is sold on-site at the ranch in the Cliento region near Naples, direct to consumers as delicious mozzarella balls, exquisite pistachio ice cream, and rich cream-filled cannolis.

"They are incredibly intelligent creatures and learn really fast," says farm tour guide, Daniel Aleman Lucker. Lucker worked in the stables with the buffalo for ten months before turning tour guide for the facility, which now hosts 15,000 visitors each year.

But the 600 buffalo of Vanullo are also milked in robotic boxes. They are bred to have just the right-sized teats for the job and stay for nine months in a concrete-lined facility. Feed comes to them pre-cut and pre-mixed in troughs, and the animals graze on actual fields for only the three months a year in which they are not producing milk. A single human being oversees the entire operation each day.

In other words, Vanullo is seemingly a ranch full of contradictions.

"That is not at all what I thought an Italian, organic ranch would be like," said a young woman who visited Vanullo from Gustolab, the food and culture studies institute in Rome, where I taught a seminar this June. "I thought there would be rolling hills, and the buffalo would graze on green grass."

For the last several years the "food movement" (for lack of a better term) has focused on telling stories. The theory goes that telling the "story" of a brand will create an emotional connection between consumers, farming and products. Green rolling hills and picturesque black and white cows relate to consumers that a product is pure, while tales of farmers and their families assure us that a farm is sustainable (after all we innately assume "generations of farmers" have taken care of the land).

Adding to the noise are cooking shows celebrating chefs with skills no one needs - when might anyone need to make an appetizer out of five unrelated items? - TV show doctors

giving diet advice based on questionable science, and restaurants reviewed by people with no knowledge of restaurants or reviewing.

It is no surprise that despite years of "storytelling", the public remains largely ill-informed about the food system. Despite the bucolic-looking labels and idealistic storytelling, organic, it turns out, does not actually mean low tech, low efficiency or the presence of old school machinery or hand-milked cows. Producing local food remains logistically - and financially - complicated for the majority of the world's farms and ranches, even if the public now views it as more wholesome. And "knowing our farmer", sadly, does not necessarily mean we understand the practices he or she uses on the farm.

The problem is that there continues to be little understanding as to what terms like "local", "sustainable", or even "organic" mean, or why they might be important. That is because the same marketing is used to sell us everything from trucks to cereal; milkshakes to organic yogurt.

If marketing products is the same as a brand "telling its story" the waters get muddied. If all consumers see are romantic images of farms, they learn nothing of the true financial, social and environmental complexities of farming.

This is fine if you are simply trying to sell products, but woefully inadequate if you are attempting to change an ingrained system.

By opening such a high-tech (and investment-intensive), yet organic, closed-loop facility to the public Vanullo is making a statement. It is time we stop romanticising where our food comes from, and allow the public to learn what it really takes to get food from farm to fork.

Beth Hoffman is a freelance radio reporter, multimedia producer, and writer. She is currently an assistant professor at the University of San Francisco, where she teaches Audio Production and Food Media. She tweets @BethFoodAg and blogs regularly for Forbes.com on food and agriculture.

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