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The friction between the fair-trade and local-first movements

Trading Places

By Eric Blair

Food shopping has never been more political than it is now. Beyond the clutter of brands vying for consumers' attention in any grocery store aisle, deep social movements are at play, and marketers are keen to exploit their ideas to slap an additional 30 cents on a price tag. Eat organic. Buy local. Help children in Africa get access to clean drinking water. Support Lowcountry shrimp. The consumer is more powerful than ever, and at times, also more confused.

A few years ago, the concept of buying fair trade goods caught on. To be considered fair trade, a product has to meet the labor and environmental standards set by one of several international organizations. While the fair trade sales are still rapidly increasing, the public's concern has shifted toward global warming and eating local.

Now, the green movement is all the rage. Lowcountry Local First, an organization that promotes local food and agriculture, was formed six months ago and has quickly expanded its activities. The idea behind the "eat local" movement is to strengthen ties between local consumers and producers, increase awareness about where and how food is produced, and reduce CO2 emissions by encouraging people to eat food that doesn't have to travel thousands of miles to get to your dinner table.

But can today's moral standard be reconciled with the one from a few years ago? Is it possible to eat local and support farmers in developing countries? And should that be the goal in the first place?

In the United Kingdom, where both the fair trade and eat local movements are more established, tensions between the two movements have reportedly increased in recent years, but so far, that is not the case in the United States and certainly not in Charleston, where recently the city's one fair trade store, Global Awakening on King Street, had a flier from Lowcountry Local First on its front counter.

However, on some college campuses, a debate about how to approach these issues has begun. William Moseley, a geography professor at Macalester College in Minnesota, whose research focuses on agriculture in southern and western Africa, has first-hand experience.

Recently, Moseley began to notice that while many of his students were becoming more interested in eating local, they didn't have the same enthusiasm for fair trade. This concerned him because while the



Ray Keane, a trader with coffee importer Balzac brothers & company, checks out the merchandise
Leslie McKellar

market for fair trade represents less than one percent of global agricultural trade, it is growing around 40 percent a year.

Moseley believes fair trade presents a way for small organic farmers and food cooperatives to become economically viable in the face of competition from large-scale plantation farms. He's seen this while studying a cooperative wine vineyard in South Africa run by about 60 black farmers. The cooperative provides its members with better health care and working conditions than the large-scale owner-operated vineyards and relies on wine exports to break even.

In November, Moseley wrote an editorial in the *San Francisco Chronicle* criticizing the local food movement for being too insular. He did not reject the idea of eating local, but argued that conscientious consumers had to balance localism with an international perspective, one that included understanding our connections to the developing world. The response he received on some websites was openly hostile, and he began to think that it was because he was pushing people outside their comfort zone. Buying local is, after all, a simple theory — you go to the supermarket and look for local goods — and he was asking people to take a more nuanced approach. Not everyone appreciated it.

"I think part of that frustration was that I was complicating things, and they didn't want it to be complicated, they didn't want to have to think more deeply about it," he says. "It pushes you to understand that you're part of a global trading system and that trading system isn't necessarily an even playing field."

Gawain Kripke, the policy director at Oxfam America, a global anti-poverty organization, is concerned about where this debate might be headed. He sees the local food movement as being driven by a mix of concerns — a sense of supporting one's community, knowing about how food is produced and its environmental cost. He says that we should understand what criteria we are applying when making decisions about the food we buy. Some fair-trade products, for instance, actually have a lower carbon footprint than their equivalent in the United States, even when the transportation costs are factored in.

"It's important to parse out what the motivations are, and I think there is a worry that the local movement might turn into protectionism or a me-first-ism about our economic relationships, and that could be devastating for poor people in other countries who are really looking for a first step on the economic ladder and trading the things they produce, like agricultural goods, is one of the ways they can improve their livelihoods," he says.

Perhaps no one is more responsible for bringing more fair-trade products into the port of Charleston than Raymond Keane, a trader with Balzac Brothers & Company, a coffee import company that has been in business since the early 1900s. Balzac imports roughly 50 million pounds of coffee beans into the United States a year. Within the last four years, the amount of those beans that are certified as having been produced under fair conditions for workers and with methods that are environmentally sustainable has more than doubled.

Keane says that the coffee industry is in the midst of a generational shift, as younger, more environmentally conscious leaders take the reigns. Much of the change, he says, is fueled by consumer interest. He realizes that producing and transporting coffee gives off CO2 emissions, but he doesn't see a way around it in the short term.

"It's our business, and it is an impact, but coffee is such a huge part of the life of all these people," he

says. "To curtail that, if we as Americans say, 'If you don't produce it here, we really don't need to use it', so you are going to tell the 40 million Latin Americans who work in coffee that we don't want their product ... what would happen then?"

For Alan Moore, program director of the local and sustainable agricultural program at Lowcountry Local First, the key word is balance. He says that consumers can support fair trade, eat local, and buy organic because all three ideas come from the same root.

"All of these things hit on very important issues on being connected again with the land and what we eat, and I feel like they are equally important," he says.

It may not be so easy. Oxfam's Kirpke thinks that there is an unavoidable intellectual tension between the fair-trade and eat-local movements, and how progressives navigate that tension will help determine how the public as a whole sees the issue. He believes that for the foreseeable future, consumers will be faced with complex choices every time they make a grocery run.

"This all goes back to very old and deep debates about the environment and about globalization, and they're all playing out in our grocery shelves right now," he says.

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