Bio-Cultural Diversity and Good Food Conventions: Comparing Engaged Eaters in Germany, Italy and Norway

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Abstract

This paper examines how highly invested food consumers in in Italy, Germany and Norway navigate the tensions between cultural food traditions and environmental sustainability. Drawing on French conventions theory and focus group discussions, we examine how these consumers justify their food choices in light of biocultural diversity – understood as the interplay between food traditions, ecological concerns, and the use of natural resources. Our analysis reveals three primary justification frameworks, or 'worlds of worth': the Domestic World, which is grounded in tradition and trust-based relationships with producers; the Green World, which focuses on ecological responsibility; and the Inspired World, which prioritises creativity and personal fulfilment. While these worlds often coexist in everyday food practices, they also generate conflicts, for example between ethical ideals and convenience, or sustainability and cultural heritage. Italian participants in our study emphasised domestic and convivial food traditions, Germans expressed a strong commitment to creative and waste-conscious eating, and Norwegians balanced ecological awareness with self-sufficiency and national food identity. Our findings demonstrate that food choices are not shaped by fixed national cultures, but by context-dependent justifications reflecting multiple, and sometimes conflicting, values. We conclude by emphasising the importance of acknowledging these tensions in order to better integrate cultural and environmental priorities in sustainable food systems.

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Introduction

The relationship between nature and culture is manifested in the way we define, produce and consume 'good food'. Understanding this fluid and culturally specific relationship is essential to promoting sustainable food systems that integrate both environmental and cultural dimensions. The concept of bio-cultural diversity emphasises the complex interdependence between biological diversity (biodiversity) and cultural diversity. It highlights the ways in which changing cultural practices, beliefs and values both shape and are shaped by the natural environment. This interplay is particularly important in the context of globalised food systems. A bio-culturally diverse food system, characterised by a wide variety of crops, species and practices, not only supports environmental sustainability and food security, but also preserves cultural traditions and practices that are essential for resilient and adaptable food systems.

This paper explores the connections between eating culturally specific foods and the natural world. A particular focus is on how engaged eaters justify their food at critical moments in the relationship between cultural conventions and natural resources. We draw on the work of Boltanski and Thévenot (2006/1991) to examine critical moments of justification, or the 'conventions' that shape social interactions, economic institutions and the governance of food systems. Their theory of conventions provides a valuable analytical framework for studying the complex and ever-changing relationships between social norms, cultural values, economic practices, and the use of natural resources within food systems (Ponte 2016). It allows for an examination of the relationship between cultural norms related to 'good food' and the broader issue of biodiversity and natural resource use. The theory is also relevant for understanding how conventions evolve over time, leading to different modes of coordination between food chain actors and collective expectations about food quality. We analyse data from focus groups with engaged eaters involved in food initiatives, to compare the cultural conventions of eating in Italy, Norway and Germany, and how these engaged eaters reflect broader concerns about natural resources and biodiversity. This enables us to compare tensions and conflicts in consumer conventions around 'good food', and to explore how these conventions shape and are shaped by the biological realities of food production. For example, while traditional meals in many European countries are culturally specific and often centred around meat, recent dietary trends such as the Planetary Health Diet challenge these conventions by promoting plant-based diets. Such changes in dietary habits may also be reflected in a shift towards increased cultivation of vegetables and legumes as alternative sources of proteins.

This paper seeks to answer the following question: How do engaged eaters justify their food cultures in relation to environmental realities of food production? By undertaking a comparative analysis of cultural conventions around eating in three national contexts, we seek to gain a deeper understanding of the linkages between nature and culture. This comparison provides insights into similarities and differences across Europe, and thus a basis for future research into how food consumption can be re-imagined as a process that contributes to both cultural and biological diversity.

Conventions theory

To analyse how engaged eaters navigate tensions and conflicts, we draw on French conventions theory, a sociological framework that explores how people coordinate and justify actions in pluralistic societies. Conventions are not static norms or personal preferences, but dynamic, context-dependent frameworks that actors invoke to make sense of situations and legitimise their actions. Central to this approach is the notion of critical moments – situations marked by uncertainty, criticism or disagreement – in which actors are forced to justify their behaviour or assess the legitimacy of others' actions (Evans, 2011). These moments of justification bring to the fore the presence of multiple, often conflicting, orders of value, or worlds. Each world offers a particular logic of evaluation rooted in historically and socially constructed values. Rather than placing these worlds in a hierarchical order, conventions theory emphasises their co-existence and interdependence. Individuals and institutions draw on different conventions depending on the situation, and this plurality creates both opportunities for coordination and sources of tension (Boltanski & Thévenot,

2006/1991; Diaz-Bone, 2010; Diaz-Bone, 2018).

This perspective is particularly useful in the context of food systems, where actors are constantly negotiating what counts as valuable, ethical or desirable food. Conventions theory has been applied to analyse how different actors justify food practices in ways that reflect and contest broader institutional dynamics. For example, Andersen (2011) shows how the distribution of organic food is regularly challenged by economic pressures or demands for efficiency. Thorslund and Lassen (2017) show how justifications for meat consumption vary depending on the context and whether animal welfare is foregrounded. Similarly, convention theory has been applied to study the transformation of food systems through alternative retail formats and food networks, including community-supported agriculture and short supply chains (Forssell & Lankoski, 2017; Forssell & Lankoski, 2018; Andreola et al., 2021; Torjusen & Vittersø, 2023).

Table 1: Overview of the seven worlds (Boltanski/Thévenot (2006/1991), Diaz-Bone (2018), Ermann et al. (2018), Ponte (2016))

Worlds	Worth	Description
Inspired	Cannot be measured and is uncontrollable, spontaneous	Enlightenment, passion, creativity, uniqueness are important aspects. Self-realisation through the production or consumption of food.
Domestic	Worth is relational, visible in the form of (hereditary) titles, authority, trust	Important characteristics are: tradition, hierarchy, continuity, consistency, loyalty, punctuality, courtesy, craftsmanship. Personal relationship to producers leads to loyalty.
Green	People who are committed to protecting the environment and live accordingly	Environmentally friendly production methods determine the value. Products are seen as healthier and environmentally friendly, as no chemical additives are used.
Civic	Worth has disembodied collective interests (e.g. states, trade unions) and their representatives	A fair price also expresses solidarity between actors, and value creation should be anchored in the region, examples: fair trade, solidarity agriculture.
Industrial	Worth through functionality, professionalism, predictability, reliability	Order through (technical) efficiency, performance, professionalism, long-term planning, standardisation of raw materials, use of preservatives.
Market	Worth through wealth, purchasing power	Competition as a coordination principle, orientation on product price, standardisation of products. Increase in production volume and turnover.
Fame	Worth is dependent on the opinion of others	Fame, recognition from others, creating enthusiasm, production of luxury foods, self-expression through consumption (e.g. Kobe beef).

Building on this tradition, our paper adopts the typology of seven justification worlds originally identified by Boltanski and Thévenot: the Domestic, Market, Industrial, Civic, Inspired, Fame and Green Worlds (2006/1991; Thévenot et al., 2000; Diaz-Bone, 2018; for a detailed and comparative overview see Table 1 above). Each world foregrounds a particular principle of legitimacy: personal trust and tradition in the Domestic World; price and competition in the Market World; efficiency and standardisation in the Industrial World; fairness and collective welfare in the Civic World; creativity and authenticity in the Inspired World; recognition and status in the World of Fame and ecological sustainability in the Green World. Other worlds have been identified but we stick to the original six worlds developed by Boltanksi and Thévenot (2006/1991) plus the Green World (Thévenot et al. 2000). We do not for example consider the project world developed by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), which corresponds to the rise of flexible, networked capitalism. Even though this logic is

increasingly relevant to food systems, the focus on contexts such as food start-ups, mobile markets and digital platforms promoting alternative eating is less relevant to our research question.

It is important to stress that these conventions should not be understood as characteristics of fixed social groups or national cultures. Rather, they function as situational logics of justification, invoked by individuals and institutions to make sense of action and coordination. In everyday food practices, people often draw on multiple conventions simultaneously. A consumer may support organic farming for environmental reasons (Green World), while at the same time being concerned about fair wages for producers (Civic World) and constrained by product price (Market World). This juxtaposition of justifications can lead to synergies, but also to contradictions and frictions that require negotiation or compromise (Swaffield et al., 2018; Brandl et al., 2024).

As conventions are invoked and contested, they contribute to both stabilising and transforming the food system. Each world is in part a critique of another: the Green World critiques the Market World for prioritising efficiency over sustainability; the Domestic World critiques the Industrial World for eroding local knowledge and personal ties; the Civic World resists the individualism implicit in the Inspired or celebrity World. It is through these critiques and tensions that new compromises emerge – or fail to emerge – in institutional arrangements and everyday food choices. In this study, we use conventions theory as a framework to analyse how individuals justify their food practices and the values they attach to what is considered 'good food'. We examine how competing or overlapping conventions shape consumer behaviour and contribute to broader debates about sustainability, fairness and quality in the food system.

Focus Group Methodology

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used (Halkier, 2008, 2010) to explore biocultural diversity and good food conventions. The discussions aimed to explore consumers' views on and tensions about their food environments. The methodology was designed to provide in-depth insights into food supply and consumption patterns in different localities, and to contribute to a comparative understanding of different food practices. The FGDs were conducted in Italy, Norway and Germany. In each country, two focus groups were conducted with between five and eight participants. Recruitment began by selecting individuals involved in local food networks, followed by snowball sampling for the subsequent focus group in the same geographical area, this time including consumers not involved in collective efforts (see Table 2 Overview of focus group participants). The choice to focus on consumers already involved in food initiatives was made to better highlight the different worlds and the tensions involved in reconciling different conventions. However, the recruitment of other types of participants ensured heterogeneity that was critical to understanding the synergies and trade-offs between food conventions in different modes of food consumption in the three countries (Stamer, 2018). Most participants had above average incomes and we had more female than male participants. A standardised protocol was followed for all focus groups in the three countries, to ensure consistency in data collection. The protocol provided common guidelines to structure the discussions and encourage participant engagement. Each focus group session lasted approximately two hours and was moderated by a facilitator who guided the discussion using a set of core questions designed to explore key issues such as:

- Participants' perceptions and experiences of their local food environment
- The diversity and accessibility of organic and 'good food' in their communities
- Barriers and opportunities to developing diverse, sustainable diets and food consumption practices
- The social and cultural meanings attached to food in different local contexts.

Several techniques were used to facilitate rich discussions, including the use of mapping exercises where participants were asked to visualise and describe their local food environment. Visual material was also used as participants were asked to take pictures on two themes: their 'typical' food basket, and something that represented 'good food' to them. They were instructed that these photos should not show individuals or their faces, for privacy reasons. Ideally, the facilitator obtained prior consent from the participants to show such photos and discuss them with the rest of the group. The use of visual materials in focus groups has

also been found to be valuable in other food-related research (Halkier, 2017). These methods helped to ground discussions in concrete experiences and provided a basis for comparative analysis. For the purposes of this paper, we focus on one section of the protocol that included a discussion of what constitutes good food. In line with convention theory, this elicited participants' explanations and justifications of what they experienced as 'good food' (Andersen, 2011). We also included other sections where appropriate, such as discussions about what a typical food basket/daily food was for the participants, as reflections on 'good food' also appeared there.

The focus groups were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and detailed notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and discussion dynamics. The recordings were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis, which involved coding the data for each country to identify patterns related to food consumption and its connection to the natural environment. After initial coding, we compared similarities and differences across focus groups and countries, to understand how food consumption relates to biocultural diversity.

Table 2: Overview Focus groups

	We recruited participants that we considered as engaged eater, i.e. mainly from alternative food networks
Italy 1	Invested in food through the involvement in a community supported agriculture (CSA) group
Italy 2	Snowball (acquaintances from the CSA group)
Norway 1	Invested in food through the involvement in a CSA group
Norway 2	Snowball (acquaintances from the CSA group)
Germany 1	Urban group of consumers interested in food, involved in a food policy council
Germany 2	Rural group that is active in the country women's association

Results: Comparing Conventions of Bio-Cultural Diversity

In the results section, we elaborate on the three most prominent worlds that emerged from the focus groups in Germany, Italy and Norway, each reflecting different cultural conventions about 'good food'. While directly addressing broad issues such as resource use, ethical considerations, and individual consumption practices, and touching on different aspects such as community, tradition, sustainability, creativity, and reducing food waste, we highlight the connection between these issues and biocultural diversity. A more detailed discussion follows in the 'Discussion' section.

Germany

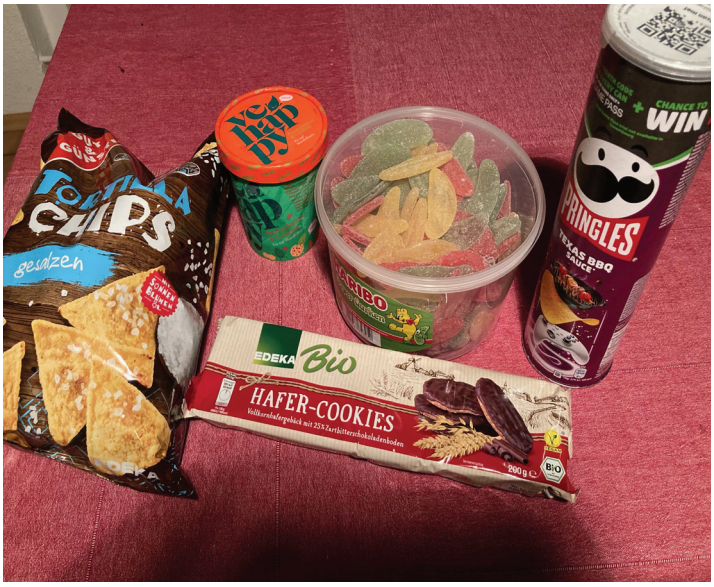
In the German focus groups, participants articulated notions of 'good food' that were shaped by creativity, environmental awareness, and tradition. Three justification worlds were most prominent: the Inspired World, the Domestic World, and the Green World. These worlds often overlapped, but also revealed tensions – between aspirations and constraints, and between ideals and everyday compromises. Participants' comments suggest that food practices in Germany are shaped by a strong desire for innovation and sustainability, but tempered by infrastructural, economic and social realities.

The Inspired World emerged as particularly central. Participants often framed good food as a matter of creativity, improvisation and personal fulfilment. Using leftovers, for example, was seen not only as an act of resourcefulness but also as a creative challenge:

> *It's possible to make very tasty dishes out of leftovers that you might not have thought of otherwise (P1.3).*

These practices not only resonate with broader concerns about food waste and sustainability, but also highlight the role of aesthetic pleasure and autonomy in everyday food practices.

Fig. 1: occasional 'good food' (P1.1)



Creativity also allowed participants to navigate tensions between their ideals and everyday pressures. One participant described a typical Saturday night: lounging on the sofa with snacks and sweets, acknowledging the joy and indulgence of the moment despite its distance from more considered food values.

> *For me, that's part of good food – just once in a while (P1.1).*

This illustrates how the Inspired World can act as a release when other conventions – particularly those related to sustainability or domestic effort – become too constraining.

In addition, creative practices were often gendered and context-specific. For example, some participants described engaging in elaborate meal preparation for family or guests, while at other times relying on convenience foods or simplified routines. This showed how the Inspired World can act as a reconciling force, allowing participants to navigate conflicting values without abandoning them.

The Domestic World featured prominently, often linked to practices of home cooking, preservation, and relationships with trusted producers. Participants valued the ability to control food quality and ingredients:

> *I can do a lot myself and know what is in it (P1.5).*

Activities such as baking bread from home-ground flour or growing vegetables in the garden reinforced a sense of agency and craftsmanship.

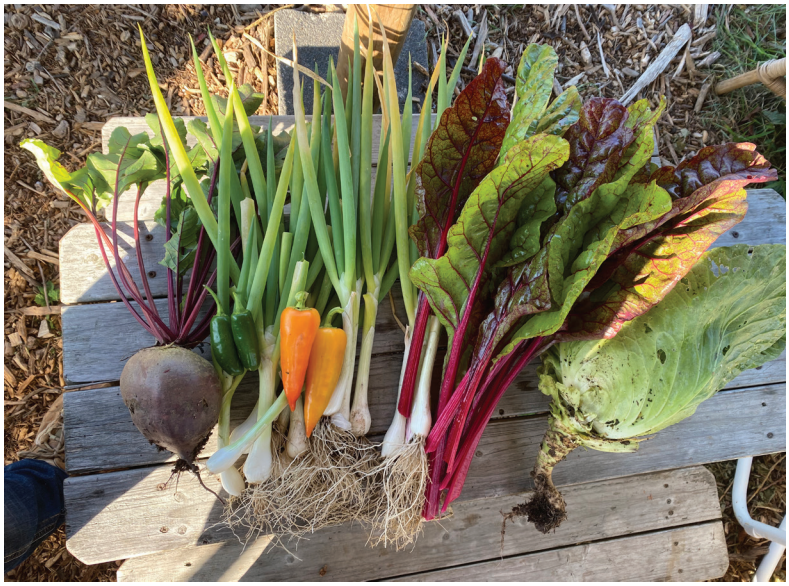
These practices were not only about personal satisfaction, but also about maintaining food traditions that carry emotional and historical weight. For example, participants described making soups with organic chicken sourced from trusted farmers, thus echoing past family routines while integrating contemporary ethical considerations. The Domestic World in Germany was found to be strongly anchored in trust, care and control, although it was often in tension with the industrial and market systems that dominate food provision.

In some cases, the Domestic World revealed interpersonal tensions. For example, one woman negotiated her vegetarian tendencies with her husband's more meat-centred expectations, rooted in his upbringing in a butcher's household. Testimonies like this illustrate how personal relationships and gender dynamics shape food practices, and how domestic norms can both support and constrain change.

The Green World was also prominent, particularly in relation to eating seasonally, reducing food waste, and favouring local, organic produce. Participants showed a strong awareness of the environmental impact

of their food choices and tried to manage their consumption accordingly. Avoiding imported goods such as avocados or bananas, preferring cosmetically imperfect vegetables, and preserving seasonal fruit were all seen as acts of environmental responsibility.

Fig. 2: The 'best' food - self-grown from the garden (P2.3)



However, tensions within the Green World often surfaced. For example, some participants debated whether it was more sustainable to eat locally produced and stored apples or imported organic ones. Others highlighted the energy costs of refrigerating local produce. These reflections show that acting according to green values requires complex judgements and negotiations, especially when infrastructure, availability and transparency are lacking. One participant remarked:

> *I always try to buy organic, but if there are only organic apples from New Zealand and the conventional ones are from Germany, then I prefer to take the German apples (P1.1).*

Here, environmental values (transport emissions) trump organic certification, but the lack of clear information about origin, storage or production makes such decisions difficult. These tensions show that food choices are rarely pure expressions of a single convention, but are situated, strategic, and sometimes contradictory.

Participants also discussed the challenge of reconciling green values with living conditions. Long working hours, limited access to markets, or the need to travel to certain stores limited their ability to shop in line with ecological ideals. One participant explained:

> *Sometimes I don't have the time or the capacity to go to the farmer's market...Then I just go to EDEKA and buy the pre-packed organic tomatoes" (P1.1).*

Infrastructural and logistical constraints – often linked to wider patterns of industrial food systems – make it difficult to fully realise green commitments.

The German discussions also revealed tensions between the worlds, as well as within them. Participants often had to reconcile inspired pleasure with environmental guilt, or domestic traditions with civic or green ideals. For example, one participant, once a passionate fish eater, now avoids seafood because of concerns about radiation and contamination, switching to local trout when possible. This is a compromise that balances inspired enjoyment with environmental caution and domestic confidence.

Another recurring pattern was the way participants 'ranked' their values contextually, choosing between organic and local depending on the product, or prioritising less packaging over lower transport emissions. These practices were often described in terms of 'rules of thumb' or flexible strategies rather than fixed principles, thus revealing a pragmatic orientation towards ethical eating.

Ultimately, the Inspired World often served to resolve tensions. Creativity in food preparation, such as baking with local grains or experimenting with preservation techniques, allowed participants to integrate green and domestic values in new, personally meaningful ways. The joy of creating something from scratch often bridged the gap between tradition and innovation, or between sustainability and convenience.

Italy

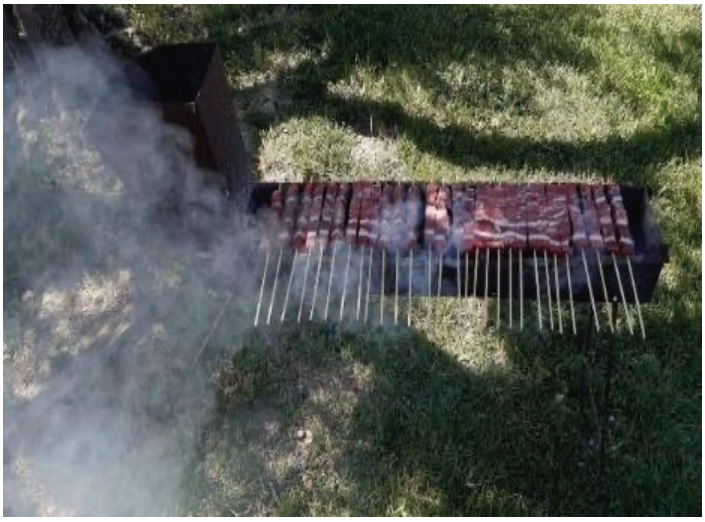
In the Italian focus groups a significant proportion of the statements can be categorised as belonging to the Domestic World. Participants emphasised trust, personal relationships, tradition and the authenticity of local and handmade products. One participant commented:

> *Good products are those where you know the producers, like the meat from Aneghe Taneghe (CSA producer)" (P1.3).*

Another participant stressed the importance of simplicity, trust and local control in homemade food:

> *For me, good food is dough, essential without salt. I make about three kilos of bread a week and I also make pizza. I like to make my own dough. I trust others, but I prefer to check when it suits my taste (...) Simple food is the best. (P1.4).*

Fig. 3: Memories of good food: arrosticini (P1.2)



Selective buying habits, rooted in family traditions and direct relationships with producers, were also highlighted:

> *I would start with arrosticini; I don't eat much meat, but for an Abruzzese, they are inevitable. When I go south, there's always an arrosticini moment... My family is very selective, even if unconsciously, when it comes to food. My grandparents are also very careful about what they buy, although they are not so conscious in the 'modern' sense. They don't just go to the supermarket, they prefer certain producers who are known for their farming methods. (P1.2)*

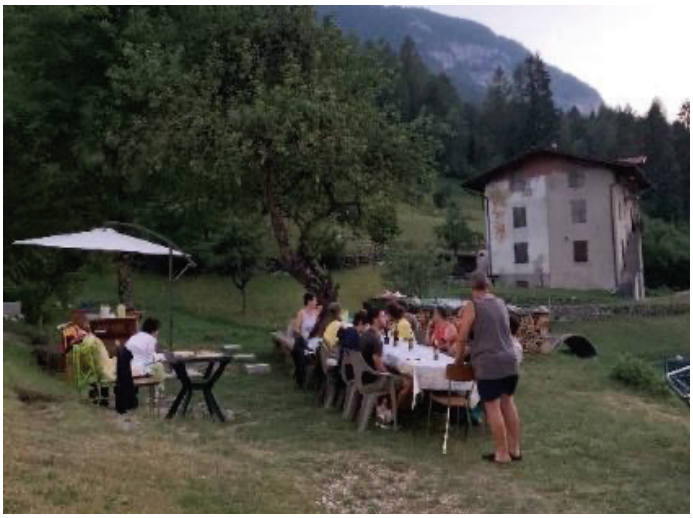
These comments underscore a deep attachment to food practices grounded in familial continuity and producer familiarity – hallmarks of the Domestic World – while also expressing a critical distance from the logics of impersonal, standardised, or celebrity-endorsed consumption, typical of the Industrial and Fame Worlds.

Conviviality emerged as a recurring theme across the focus groups. One participant highlighted the communal dimension of good food, stating:

> *For me, good food is food that is eaten together [...] For me, good food is paying more attention to care, to local products... so for me, good food has an aspect of community and sharing that is inescapable and that goes beyond eating good things" (P1.7). Similarly, another participant noted: "...good food in the sense of being together with all my friends. It was very nice; we prepared things together. (P2.4)*

Meat often features in these convivial moments, though its ethical implications are not overlooked. As one participant acknowledged:

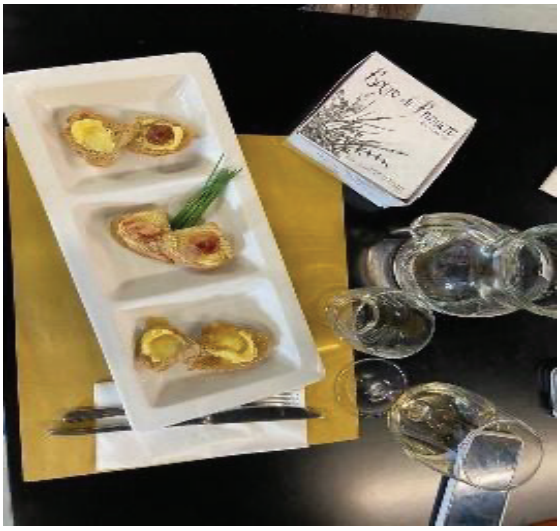
Fig. 4: Conviviality (P1.7)



> *The barbecue is unfortunately something that is done from time to time. We know it's ethically questionable, but it's always a moment of gathering (P1.1).*

These narratives reflect a powerful intertwining of the Domestic World, where food is tied to tradition, family practices, and interpersonal trust, and the Civic World, which values collective well-being and the social dimension of food. Shared meals and collective preparation are not merely acts of nourishment but also expressions of community care and social cohesion. At the same time, these practices bring participants into a zone of moral and political ambivalence: convivial traditions involving

Fig. 5: Slow Food dish (P1.1)



meat consumption sit uneasily with the ethical and ecological concerns associated with the Green World, as well as with the standardised, efficiency-driven logic of the Industrial World. Thus, conviviality becomes a space of both affirmation and tension, one not only where meaningful social bonds are forged, but also where contradictions between values are negotiated.

Some participants' statements reflect the Inspired World, emphasising creativity, passion, and an appreciation of the culinary arts. One participant shared:

> *My partner and I are both into food and wine. We both believe that money well spent is money well spent on food, and so we often indulge in going out and we prefer to go out less often but to good places" (P1.2). Another participant echoed this sentiment, expressing a love of discovering unique dining experiences (P1.1).*

This passion for culinary discovery extends beyond prestige dining. One participant conveyed the enthusiasm for exploring vegan cuisine:

> *Right now, for me, good food is vegan food: (...) there's always a lot of new flavours to discover and it makes me feel good from so many points of view, both ethically and in terms of taste... (P1.6).*

Another described the satisfaction of growing her own food and preparing meals with it, illustrating a personal and creative connection to nature:

> *This is my newly planted vegetable garden. For me, good food comes from here because I'm lucky to have a garden. I like to show the children the tomatoes hidden under the leaves (...). In summer, it's wonderful to come home for lunch and pick cherry tomatoes and cucumbers for a fresh salad. It gives me great satisfaction. (P2.3).*

Taken together, these accounts highlight the Inspired World's emphasis on culinary exploration, aesthetic pleasure, and the joy of creating and experiencing exceptional food. This world values food not only as sustenance but as an expressive and transformative practice. In some cases, such as prestige dining, this aligns with the World of Fame, where recognition and exclusivity are central. In others, such as home gardening or foraging, the Inspired World runs counter to the values of social distinction, aligning more closely with simplicity and local embeddedness. These practices often challenge the Industrial World, resisting standardised, efficiency-driven food systems, in favour of slow, intentional, and sensory-rich alternatives.

Some narratives also strongly reflect the Green World, where sustainability, naturalness, and an ecological ethos are paramount. One participant emphasised his commitment to untreated, seasonal produce:

> *First of all, for me, good food is synonymous with natural, which means that food doesn't have any kind of treatment: it comes as nature creates it! These are my apples, for example: they're small because I don't use any kind of external input [...] We're used to eating pulses at least one, two, three times a week, either as a substitute or even as a supplement... lentils, beans, chickpeas. (P2.5)*

His dietary choices, including the regular consumption of legumes, further illustrate sustainable eating practices. Another informant illustrated a personal connection to nature through her foraging activities in the alpine pastures, where she picked herbs for cooking:

> *I like to pick herbs when I find them, so especially in this season I always go to the alpine pasture to pick herbs and cook them. I usually make omelettes with the famous 'happy eggs' or gnocchi. Maybe because I've picked them, because I know where they come from, because it's also a satisfaction... the time it takes... I should say that I never throw them away... In fact, when I harvest, even if I'm invited to a pizza, I stay home because I have to eat my herbs. (P2.1)*

Her careful use of ethically sourced ingredients and her practice of preserving what she gathers point to a respectful and circular approach to food, rooted in both ecological awareness and traditional know-how.

Overall, the Italian focus group participants strongly expressed the values of the Domestic World: tradition, family ties, and trust-based relationships with local producers. Homemade foods, regionally rooted specialties, and selective buying based on long-standing habits are all central. Conviviality further reinforces this orientation, linking food to moments of togetherness and care, while also reflecting ethical considerations on meat consumption.

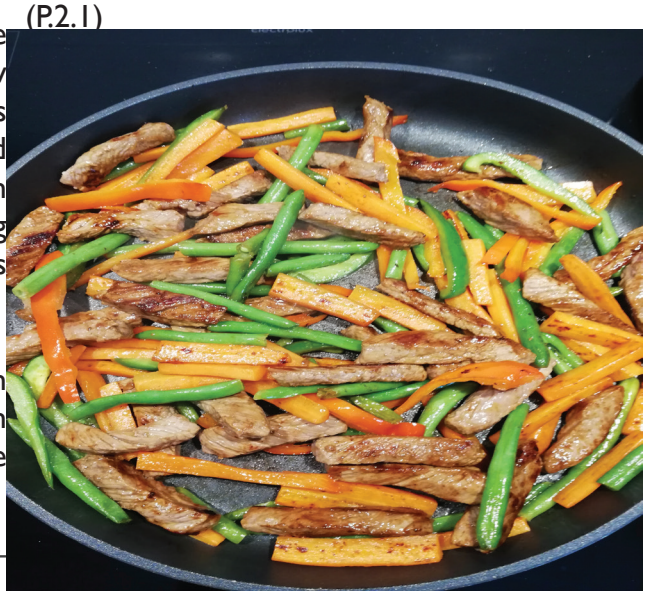
At the same time, other worlds coexist and complicate this picture. The Inspired World brings in notions of creativity, experimentation, and sensory pleasure; the Green World foregrounds sustainability and ecological responsibility; the Civic World appears in practices of sharing and collective responsibility; the World of Fame emerges in aspirations for prestige dining; and the Industrial World is present as a foil, representing what participants often resist in their everyday choices.

These overlapping perspectives reveal the complex negotiations people undertake in defining good food today. They show how ethical, aesthetic, and relational dimensions intertwine, producing a multifaceted food culture where tradition and innovation, sustainability and pleasure, personal ethics and social ties are continuously in dialogue. In this way, Italian participants engage with contemporary food challenges not as passive consumers, but as situated actors navigating a diverse and often contradictory moral landscape, one shaped as much by bio-cultural heritage as by evolving values and new possibilities.

Norway

In the Norwegian focus groups, statements related to the Domestic, Green and Inspired Worlds were central to how participants defined 'good food'. We found a strong emphasis on self-sufficiency, foraging and locally produced food (Domestic), sustainability and environmental protection (Green) and learning new cooking skills, experimenting with different types of food, and creating aesthetic dishes and table settings (Inspired).

Fig. 6: Origin. Wok with Norwegian ingredients (P2.1)



Conventions relating to the Domestic World were often justified by food safety and quality, for example when participants discussed the importance of knowing where their food came from, with one participant stating:

> *Good basic ingredients that I know the origin of and preferably something we made ourselves (P1.1).*

Other stories of 'good food' related to origin also included the enjoyment of being outdoors and eating:

> *There's a photo of a cup of coffee and blackberries (…) Because I' picked them myself in the garden and walked around picking and eating them just as they are, with a cup of coffee, and I enjoyed myself. (...) when it comes from one's own garden, to me that is absolutely fantastic. Then it tastes even better. (P.2.1)*

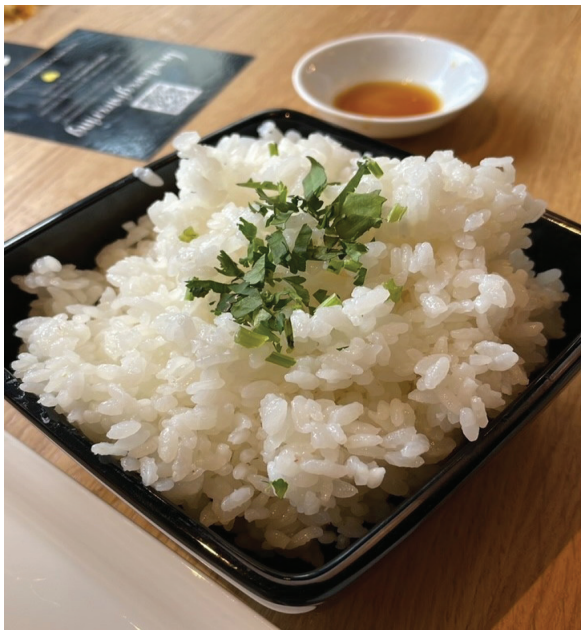
Simple cooking with pure Norwegian ingredients was also highlighted by this participant:

> *Here, I have simply cooked pork – Norwegian pork, asparagus beans, carrots and bell pepper in a wok. (…) To me, this is something of the best I can eat. Pure ingredients, meat from Norway, some vegetables which are also produced in Norway if possible. (P2.1)*

All three statements emphasise the value of knowing the origin of food, or even better, food produced oneself, and pure ingredients preferably eaten outdoors. The last participant's regret that Norwegian vegetables are

hard to get hold of, especially in the winter season, reflects a notion that the quality of domestically produced food is better than that of imported food, especially regarding food safety. These accounts reveal tension between a need to ensure safe and good quality food for the family (Domestic World), and a dissatisfaction with – or even distrust in – the foods found in ordinary retail stores (Market World). They strongly mimic the public discourse in Norway, also influenced by the food and agricultural policy, that depicts Norwegian agricultural production as more safe, natural and environmental friendly.

Fig. 7Family care (P2.2)



Family care (Domestic), however, relates not only to the quality or safety aspects of food but also to the social dimension of sharing meals, especially in families with children. In some situations, tensions between these social dimensions and conventions related to healthy or nutritious food were reported. One of the participants in the second focus group shared a picture of a dish with only white rice and no other side dishes like fish, meat or vegetables. She explained why this was good food to her in this particular context:

> *That one [photograph] down to the right – it's just... well, it's rice. We were at "Sabrura" (a restaurant) and had sushi. And then our oldest child asked to get some rice, because she wanted rice and soy sauce." (P2.2) "Did she get some rice?" (P2.3) "She got some rice, yes. (...) I said a little, because she doesn't eat that much, but they brought that [a large portion], so." (P2.2)*

The valuation of a dish of rice as good food clashes with the conventional notion of a proper meal including a variety of ingredients such as vegetables, fish or meat. It exemplifies the tensions in every-day life between moral norms of family care, in this case inclusion of children in a family gathering at a restaurant, belonging to the Domestic World, and other values such as health, belonging to the Civic World.

The Green World played a significant role, especially among the participants from the CSA. For them, organic food was strongly associated with good food, and was the opposite of conventional food grown with harmful chemicals (Industrial World): "*it's organic that matters to us, we rarely buy anything else*" (P1.4). Gathering food from the garden or directly from nature was also valued highly in both groups, exemplified by a participant who brought a photo of mushrooms she had picked in the forest: "…*I wanted to illustrate that foraging, that is a quality in itself.* " (P1.5)

Fig. 8: Foraging a quality in itself (P1.5)

Tensions arose, however, between the ideals of the Green World and the realities of the Norwegian food system. One participant from the CSA-group who was highly invested in organic food, both as a consumer and a producer, described how she found it hard to stick to only buying organic apples from the local grocery store in the winter, when they had run out of their own apples. She confessed that she actually preferred the taste and texture of one of the several apple varieties that were available from conventional production [Pink Lady], compared with the single variety that was available from organic production. Her favourite apple variety is 'Gravenstein': "*when that [variety] arrives, then that is the best one*". However, during the winter there is often only one organic variety available, which is not to her liking:

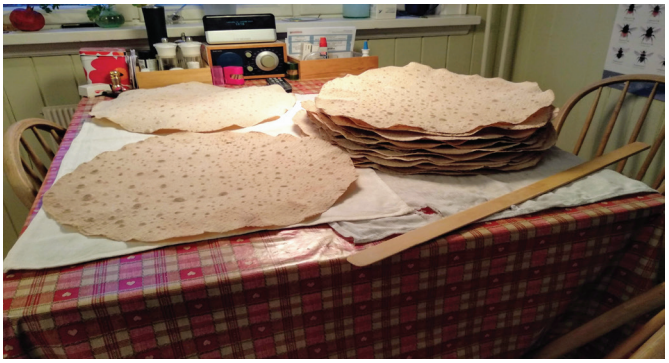
> *six such apples in that package; organic, but they're not that pretty and they're not that good (laughter) really.*

In those cases she sometimes resorts to buying conventionally grown apples:

> *It's absolutely terrible, but (…) I have a soft spot for Pink Lady (laughter); it's just so good, and it's so fresh, and it's ..(…) I don't know where they come from." (P1.3)*

This dilemma is created by the limited diversity of organic apples in the retail assortment (Industrial), and her occasional buying of conventional apples, in opposition to her expressed sustainability values (Green). Norway's reliance on imported food, particularly during the winter months, was a source of frustration for participants who wanted to support organic food and local food systems but found it difficult to do so consistently.

Fig 9: Good food inspiration: Home-made flat bread (P2.3)



Synergies and tensions between worlds contributed to both enhancement and neglect of bio-cultural (and agrobio-) diversity. One example is the Ringerike potato, a variety grown in the local district for more than 150 years. For many the potato is "a must" in traditional dishes and is especially popular around the Christmas season; it thus relates not only to the Domestic World but also to the World of Fame. However, the Ringerike potato, along with other local food products and organic products are generally hard to find, due to standardisation of the assortment of fruit and vegetables in the retail chains (Industrial and Market Worlds).

The Inspired World was also present in the Norwegian focus groups. Participants expressed enjoyment in learning new cooking skills and experimenting with different types of food, especially when these practices were linked to sustainability. One participant described how he had started baking flat bread at home with his wife, explaining that this had become a rewarding shared activity which was "more enjoyable than watching Netflix" (P2.3).

> *We've started baking flatbread ourselves. (...) It beats Netflix and whatever it may be a hundred times. It's so much more fun. So, we have a joint session, yes, about every three months, where we bake a double portion. It takes two hours to bake (P.2.3).*

This reflects the personal fulfilment that many participants derived from engaging with food in creative and sustainable ways, where the process of making food was as important as the food itself. The decision to start baking home-made flatbread was motivated by dissatisfaction with the flatbread he was used to buying [Røros flatbrød] from the regular food store. He described how he could sense that something had changed, referring to the taste and texture, and speculated that there had been a change in baking method. When baking in his own kitchen, he sourced organically grown heritage grain (spelt, wholemeal), processed at a local mill [Sigdal Mølle: farmer-owned, craftsmanship, small-scale], and utilised a traditional baking method [takke]. This shift from buying a relatively standardised flatbread in the ordinary food store (Industrial World), to making it at home with artisanal flour produced and milled by someone he knew about (Domestic World), had also resulted in a new food habit that resonated with multiple values that he described as important to him: joy and creativity from the baking, and joy of eating the desired quality of flatbread [Inspired], organic production, contribution to biodiversity by heritage grain, local distribution [Green], as well as providing his household with a product suitable for a number of traditional food dishes, and supporting his priority of eating healthily. This experience resembles some of the Italian and German examples above, where creativity belonging to the Inspired World 'dissolved' tensions, in this case between Domestic and Green World on the one hand, and Market and Industrial World on the other, subsequently leading to new, transformative food practices.

The overlap between the Domestic, Green and Inspired Worlds was particularly evident in how participants

talked about food practices that combined elements of all three worlds. For example, several participants described how they foraged for herbs or berries and then used these ingredients to create new, innovative dishes at home. This combination of sustainability, creativity and personal responsibility illustrates how food practices in the Norwegian focus groups were shaped by multiple cultural conventions that often intersected in complex ways. However, tensions between these ideals and the realities of the Norwegian food market, particularly imports that often displace domestically produced vegetables and fruit, create challenges for consumers seeking to maintain sustainable food practices.

Discussion

When analysed through convention theory, the exploration of specific interpretations of 'good food' in Italy, Germany, and Norway reveals similarities and differences. All three countries emphasise the same dominant worlds – Domestic, Inspired, and Green – but their meanings and interpretations diverge, reflecting different cultural and contextual nuances. This comparative discussion will explore these differences and offer insights into how focus group participants in Italy, Germany, and Norway reconcile their food values and practices within their broader food landscapes.

Domestic World

The Domestic World significantly influenced the perception of 'good food' in focus groups in Italy, Germany and Norway, although its influence varied from country to country. Among participants in Italy and Norway, the Domestic World was crucial, while in Germany the Inspired World was more central. In all three countries, there was a common appreciation for local products, tradition and craftsmanship. Participants expressed a common preference for handmade and locally produced food, reflecting a deep respect for authenticity and a personal connection to producers. In Italy, this connection often evoked a strong sense of home and regional identity, with traditional food practices linked, often unconsciously, to sustainability, such as the appreciation and preservation of traditional varieties. This demonstrates the intertwining of cultural traditions and environmental sustainability. The focus on dishes such as arrosticini was accompanied by a commitment to ingredient selection and building trust with local traders and producers, reflecting this commitment to cultural values and natural resources. This contrasted with German participants' descriptions of how 'new dishes' emerged from the practice of using leftovers – which highlights the value of resourcefulness over dishes requiring specific ingredients. The German participants emphasised trust in producers and the quality of products, rather than regional identity. A common feature was the value placed on personal contact with producers, where "good products are those you know".

Food-related habits showed significant differences. In Norway, the emphasis was on growing one's own food, reflecting a connection to nature and self-sufficiency. In Germany, although some participants grew their own food, this practice was less central to the household. In Italy, there was less emphasis on own production and more on traditional and local foods, with meat remaining central to many dishes, although veganism is becoming more popular due to contemporary values and environmental concerns. Health considerations also varied. Whereas in Germany, some emphasis was placed on the relationship between food and well-being, this focus was less pronounced in Italy and Norway. In Italy, food was more about conviviality, tradition and authenticity, reflecting cultural values and shared experiences rather than health concerns. In Norway, on the other hand, the participants prioritised the emotional and family aspects of food, where food should ideally have high nutritional value while meeting the expectations and food preferences of children. Home cooking was a crucial aspect of the Domestic World as it was seen to allow for control over ingredients and a sense of safety and trust, which seems to have been relevant in the German cases as well. In Italy, simplicity was emphasised, with a focus on traditional, authentic dishes.

Inspired World

The Inspired World, characterised by creativity, passion and appreciation for the culinary arts, played a

different role in each country. It was most prevalent in Germany, significant in Norway, and present to a lesser extent in Italy, where the Domestic World predominated. In both Germany and Italy, personal preparation, creativity and cooking skills were central, with an emphasis on homemade food using home-grown or local ingredients. In Germany, however, the creativity of the Inspired World was closely linked to sustainability, with participants frequently mentioning the use of leftovers and second-rate ingredients to create good meals. This sustainability-related practice was a unique feature of the Inspired World, where ingenuity was not only about cooking well, but doing so in a way that minimised waste. In Italy, the Inspired World extended beyond the domestic sphere to dining out, with participants also exploring new restaurants and different cuisines as part of their definition of good food. This emphasis on dining out and culinary exploration was less pronounced in Germany, where the focus remained on the home kitchen. The Italian respondents' enthusiasm for preparing meals and discovering unique dining experiences reflected a broader concept of the Inspired World, which encompassed both the home and external food environments.

Conviviality and eating together with family and friends was another common characteristic of the Inspired World in Germany and Italy. In both countries, preparing and sharing food was closely associated with notions of caring, community and celebration. This sense of togetherness reinforced the perception of food as 'good'. It highlighted how culinary inspiration was not limited to the food itself, but extended to the social and relational aspects of eating. In Italy, however, this connection to conviviality was often coded within the Domestic World, indicating the fluidity between these two conventions. The Norwegian focus groups stand out insofar as they mentioned that learning new cooking skills increased participants' self-confidence and made cooking more enjoyable. This emphasis on self-improvement and personal growth was less prevalent in Germany and Italy, where the Inspired World focused on creativity and enjoyment rather than skill building.

There was a notable connection between the Inspired and Domestic Worlds in Germany and Italy, as participants used homemade or locally sourced ingredients to create dishes that were both innovative and rooted in tradition. This connection was particularly evident in Italy, where participants enjoyed exploring new culinary techniques while maintaining a strong connection to their roots. Special diets also elicited enthusiasm in the Inspired World. In Germany, participants were interested in meatless or vegan diets, reflecting a passion for discovering new flavours and health-conscious eating. Similarly, in Italy, where vegan cuisine is a growing trend, participants expressed excitement about exploring new plant-based flavours and ethical considerations. These dietary preferences demonstrate the Inspired World's openness to new ideas and its role in pushing the boundaries of traditional food practices.

Green World

The Green World, characterised by environmental awareness, sustainability and a deep connection to nature, is the least prominent of the three primary worlds. However, despite its relatively minor role, it still has significant meaning in all three countries, with participants associating good food with sustainability, naturalness, and environmentally responsible practices (see also Vittersø, et al., 2024). All three countries share a strong emphasis on environmental awareness and sustainability in food choices. In Italy, this is reflected in a preference for untreated, seasonal and ethically produced foods. The emphasis on natural, untreated apples or ingredients with minimal external inputs illustrated the importance of sustainable and natural products among Italian participants. In Norway and Germany, organic foods were highlighted, reflecting a shared commitment to environmentally friendly agricultural practices among focus group participants in these countries. This focus on sustainable food consumption indicated a growing concern about the environmental impact of food production. German participants' avoidance of imported foods, such as bananas and avocados, highlighted their desire to reduce the environmental impact of long-distance food transportation. This connection between sustainability and food waste reduction was distinct from the practices in Italy where this concern was less prominent. Integrating environmental awareness with social responsibility in Germany adds a civic dimension to the Green World, showing how environmental concerns can be intertwined with solidarity for producers and less fortunate people.

In Italy, the Green World was connected to nature through activities such as foraging for herbs and making homemade preserves. This reflected participants' deep connection to the environment, and a sense of satisfaction derived from gathering and preserving food directly from the land. The connection to nature was less explicitly discussed in Germany, although some participants mentioned preserving home-grown food or using food obtained through food-sharing initiatives. In Norway, the Green World was also closely associated with nature, expressed through activities such as picking berries or mushrooms, and hunting. Involvement with nature seemed to revolve around the practical relationship between land and food, although less explicitly than in Italy. Avoiding food waste was a central theme in Germany and Norway, where participants emphasised the importance of minimising waste as part of their sustainable food practices. This was particularly pronounced in Germany, where creative approaches to reducing food waste were a key element of the Green World. Practices such as food sharing, cooking with leftovers, and adopting second-class food were prominent ways in which German participants aligned their food practices with environmental sustainability. This was furthermore linked to the Civic World where environmental and social responsibility intersect, particularly in initiatives such as food sharing that combine waste reduction with civic engagement. Animal welfare emerged as an aspect of the Green World in Norway, where participants emphasised care for animals, reflecting a broader concern for animal welfare that participants in Germany or Italy did not explicitly mention. This focus may suggest that in the Norwegian focus groups, the Green World encompassed a more comprehensive ethical consideration that included treating animals as part of the broader ecosystem.

Navigating tensions: balancing tradition, innovation, and sustainability in contemporary food practices

Across the three national contexts, food practices are shaped not only by cultural preferences or ethical commitments, but also by the tensions that arise when different justification logics intersect. These tensions are not personal inconsistencies; they reflect the plurality of conventions within which food choices are made. Convention theory helps us to understand these frictions as conflicts between orders of worth: between the worth of local tradition (Domestic World), the imperative of ecological responsibility (Green World), and the desire for creativity and pleasure (Inspired World), all under pressure from market and industrial logics.

Participants often encountered situations where one world criticised or undermined another. In Germany, for example, the Green World's call for seasonal and organic food was challenged by infrastructural constraints shaped by the Industrial and Market Worlds: supermarket routines, packaging norms, and time constraints. In Italy, reverence for tradition and taste (Domestic World) sometimes conflicted with ecological ideals when local products were not produced sustainably. In Norway, participants struggled to reconcile civic or environmental concerns with social norms around meat or convenience, demonstrating that conventions are not just external structures but internalised repertoires that are negotiated in everyday life.

One of the most striking findings is how the Inspired World often mediates these tensions. Creativity and personal fulfilment allow participants to resolve contradictions, whether by making something from leftovers, preserving home-grown produce, or finding satisfaction in occasional indulgences that deviate from strict sustainability norms. The Inspired World thus plays a strategic role in bridging worlds that might otherwise seem incompatible, offering a form of resolution that is flexible and emotionally resonant.

Yet tensions are not always resolved. Participants often articulated ambivalence, where no convention fully satisfied the competing demands of ethics, tradition, practicality and pleasure. Rather than seeing these compromises as failures, convention theory invites us to see them as critical moments that expose the limits of existing food systems. They reveal that what counts as 'good food' is contingent, situated and collectively negotiated, not simply chosen.

Understanding these tensions has wider implications. It highlights that transformation towards more sustainable and inclusive food systems cannot rely on promoting a single value – such as environmental responsibility –

at the expense of others. Instead, change requires reconciliation between multiple orders of worth, creating infrastructures and narratives that accommodate complexity and enable cooperation across differences. This recognition invites scholars and policymakers alike to move beyond linear models of behaviour and to engage with the moral and cultural pluralism that characterises food practices today. In this sense, tensions are not obstacles to be removed, but windows into the value systems that must be aligned to support meaningful and inclusive food transitions.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how engaged eaters in three European contexts – Germany, Italy and Norway – justified their eating in relation to environmental, cultural and personal concerns. Drawing on the French theory of conventions, we have shown that food choices are not governed by a single normative logic, but by multiple and often competing orders of justification. These conventions – Domestic, Green, Inspired and others – are activated in practice as people navigate dilemmas, defend actions, and adapt to constraints. Our analysis shows that tensions between conventions are not signs of inconsistency, but markers of plural value systems coexisting within everyday food cultures. These tensions – between sustainability and convenience, tradition and innovation, or ecological ideals and market infrastructure – highlight the deeply situated and often ambivalent nature of ethical food practices.

Ultimately, these dynamics need to be understood within the broader framework of biocultural diversity. Our findings suggest that people's justifications are shaped not only by social structures and individual preferences, but also by the ecological conditions and cultural histories of places. For example, the prominence of certain conventions in Italy reflects a cultural legacy of domestic embeddedness; in Norway, environmental justification is linked to landscape and regulation; in Germany, creative practices emerge as a means of reconciling multiple demands. Recognising bio-cultural diversity thus allows us to understand how food systems are both ecologically and culturally embedded, and how this embeddedness determines what is seen as legitimate or 'good' food.

A key insight from this study is that people engage in situated moral improvisation, rather than adherence to fixed values. Conventions function as practical repertoires that are adapted and reconfigured in response to specific social, material and infrastructural realities. This reinforces the utility of convention theory not just as a lens on institutional order, but as a method for understanding everyday ethical complexity. Returning to the idea of bio-cultural diversity, we argue that cultural and ecological specificity is not a barrier to transformation – it is a precondition for sustainable change. Rather than universalising food ethics, it is more productive to build on the ways in which people already negotiate values within their contexts. Supporting diverse pathways that allow different worlds of justification to translate, align, or coexist is essential for fostering cooperation and legitimacy in food transitions.

Finally, this paper suggests several avenues for future research. First, further studies could explore how tensions between conventions unfold not only at the level of individuals, but also within policy design, food marketing, or civic activism. Second, longitudinal or ethnographic studies could explore how justifications evolve over time, particularly in response to crises, policy shifts or technological change. Third, more comparative work is needed beyond Europe, particularly in the Global South, to understand how bio-cultural diversity plays out under different agro-ecological and socio-political conditions. Lastly, more attention should be paid to infrastructural enablers and barriers – such as access, time or transparency – that often determine which conventions are feasible in practice. In this sense, tensions are not obstacles but productive sites of reflection and innovation. They reveal the moral grammars, social infrastructures and ecological entanglements that shape food practices today, and offer insights into how a more sustainable, culturally attuned food future might emerge.

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