



Fair Trade in the North?

Domestic Fair Trade enters the market

I love to eat fresh organic strawberries. In the summer I buy them from local family-farm producers here in rural Wisconsin, but in the winter I must source them from afar, which is when my decision to eat strawberries gets tough. I understand that the USDA organic seal on the transported strawberries verifies that they are grown under the environmental conditions that are important to me, but what about the labor conditions that are equally as important? Can I get organic and fair trade strawberries?

The US-based Domestic Fair Trade Association (DFTA) has been working on these questions since it formed as a working group in 2005. North American family farmers and farmworkers face challenges similar in important respects to their counterparts in the developing world: volatile prices leading to bankruptcy, and below poverty wages in unfair and unsafe working conditions. Many DFTA members are U.S. and Canadian farmers and manufacturers who incorporate traditional fair trade principles and criteria into their operations in North America, and would like to demonstrate to consumers that integrity in labor and sustainability are important to them, too.

Swanton Berry Farm, located in Santa Cruz California, is one of these producers. They would like shoppers to know that they not only grow their berries organically, but they also treat all employees with dignity and fairness. As Jim Cochran, founder and president of Swanton Berry Farm states: "What would be the point of farming organically if the workers were underpaid, over-worked, or treated without respect?" They were the first organic farm in the US to sign a contract with the United Farm Workers of America and carry the Union label which, Jim notes, recognizes "the professional relationship we have with our employees as co-partners in our joint effort to produce the best strawberries available anywhere."

Timothy Young, founder of Food For Thought which produces and sells organic and fair trade jams, salsas and sauces, sees domestic fair trade this way: "It is a simple and needed concept. If fairness works internationally, why not use that model domestically? After all, how could a consumer, that does not know me or Food For Thought personally, know the difference between a global/industrial jar of fruit preserves and a Food For Thought product? Transparent third party certification to a rigorous Domestic Fair Trade standard would allow those that qualify to step up to the plate and get credit for their efforts."

However when discussing domestic fair trade with others, questions arise such as:

- Isn't fair trade about helping small-scale farmers and marginalized craft producers in developing countries?
- Does domestic mean the product/ingredient does not leave the country it was grown in? Doesn't the definition for trade inherently mean 'between countries'?

- How could we distinguish fair trade products grown and processed in the traditional global south from the 'developed' global north?

Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps is a manufacturing member of the DFTA that wants consumers to be aware that the company's famous soaps contain not only traditional fair trade and organically-sourced oils such as the coconut, olive, and palm oils, but also domestic fair trade and organically-sourced hemp oil, that they purchase from Farmer Direct Coop, a Canadian supplier who only deals in organic and fairly-traded ingredients. How should they differentiate the oils that come from traditional fair trade sources and non-traditional sources?

Nasser Abufarha, the founder of Canaan Fair Trade, the largest fair trade exporter of olive oil to the US and Europe, is concerned about recognizing the different struggles that US farmers and farm workers have relative to their counterparts in international fair trade. "Struggles that need to be recognized, but depending possibly not as fair trade." As Nasser says "family farms, going against the subsidized corporate giants, yes; but if a single estate olive oil producer in Spain or California does the right things socially and environmentally, this does not go in the same category as 'fair trade.'"

Wolfgang Kathe, head of the Social and FairTrade Department at Switzerland-based certifier IMO agrees. "We need to be careful that domestic fair trade in North America or the European Union does not support 'rich' farmers or production situations but contributes to improving the living conditions of those that are marginalized in the local context. The more fair trade that is available, the more the consumers may look for it in other products as well."



The US is not alone in working on the idea of domestic fair trade. Last year Italy's Altr-Mercato, launched a domestic fair trade brand called Solidale Italiano (www.altromercato.it). They intend "to be an active and proactive actor in a social economy based on justice, sustainability and cooperation as well as on the principles of Fairtrade". Germany, France and the UK are working on domestic fair trade certification as well.

Biofach, the world's largest organic trade show, will again host a Fair Trade Forum this year, including a presentation entitled Domestic Fair Trade vs. Traditional International Fair Trade. The panelists will discuss the need for Domestic Fair Trade, the risks and opportunities for International Fair Trade and whether synergies can be developed between the two approaches.

Fortunately for consumers like me, fair labor certification for North American farm labor is now available. The North Carolina-based Agriculture Justice Project has developed a set of standards and has accredited certifiers such as Florida Organic Growers, Midwest Organic Services Association, and Oregon

Tilth to conduct inspections and audits. Other certifiers are preparing to enter in the US market in 2012.

Branding, marketing, and messaging about domestic fair trade products in the market were among the many topics discussed at the December 2011 annual meeting of the Domestic Fair Trade Association. The conference attracts representatives from producer/farmer groups, farm worker and food service organizations, retailers, manufacturers, certification agencies and others.

Prior to the meeting, David Bronner, president of Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, introduced a discussion to a broad group of fair trade enthusiasts. He asked: "How should we identify US domestic fair trade products in the market?" While many in the movement correctly note that saying "Domestic Fair Trade" on the label conveys what it means--applying international fair trade criteria to commodities produced at home in North America-- members of the group wondered how traditional fair trade farmers and producers in developing countries might feel about using the term this way. And what about commodities produced fairly in other developed countries such as in Europe or Japan? Also as an ingredient or product descriptor, "Domestic Fair Trade" is pretty wordy. Many in the conversation seemed to embrace "Fair Deal" as a preferred option for ingredient and product descriptors, while keeping the term "Domestic Fair Trade" to describe the overall movement. The term "Fair Deal" was originated by Farmer Direct, Dr. Bronner's Canadian hemp oil supplier, also a pioneer in domestic fair trade. The company is comfortable seeing the term used generally.

With fair trade experiencing monumental change in both international and domestic realms, a group of concerned fair trade participants have formed the North America Fair Trade Stakeholder Council. The group would like to clarify the direction for the Fair Trade movement in North America and seeks to advance these four goals:

- Define fair trade and the movement, what they are and what they are not
- Organize the North American fair trade movement under a coordinated infrastructure with a common vision
- Reach agreement on a plan for cooperation and accountability within the movement
- Develop a clear external message for the movement

The Council will occasionally invite public comment. Please check the Fair World Project website for more information: fairworldproject.org/stakeholdercouncil

While the global fair trade movement in general is reviewing, rejuvenating and readjusting through its growing pains, domestic fair trade is poised for take off. This is a great time to introduce consumers to domestically produced commodities that have been produced fairly and ethically.

Next winter, I hope consumers like me will be able to purchase organic and fairly produced strawberries - along with a plethora of other domestic fair trade, er, Fair Deal products.

Fair World Project would like to hear your opinion! Please join the discussion by sending in a letter to the editor or join us on the website: www.fairworldproject.org