

Shaping our Community with a Solidarity Purchasing Group

For ethical consumers, a further step from weighing the environmental and social impact of what they buy, through careful choice of products, can be joining a *Gruppo Acquisto Solidale* (Solidarity Purchasing Group). Unlike *Purchasing Groups*, usually set up by consumers to buy food and other commonly used goods directly from producers or big retailers at a discounted rate, *Solidarity* groups don't simply look for the cheapest price. They put people and the environment before profit and they try to create a community of producers and consumers that interact and collaborate. In this sense, the concept of solidarity does not imply a giver and a receiver, as is often thought. It is not a one way process in which one group helps another group; it is a project shared by different groups to which they contribute equally.

G.A.S. groups have existed in Italy since the 1990s and are joined in a network, which today counts more than 800 groups. In the last 10 years, they have more than doubled and presently have a 50 or 60% annual increase. Their internal organization and the various initiatives differ greatly from one group to the other. *G.A.S. Lucca and Mattaccio* is primarily interested in purchasing food products from small local producers committed to sustainable economy. Born in 2002, it has grown steadily to 100 families that are permanently involved, and several that give their occasional contribution.

VEGETABLE BOX

In 2010, the Lucchese G.A.S. started a special project called C.O.S.A., acronym for *Comunità Organizzata che Sostiene l'Agricoltura*, something similar to the *Community-Supported*

Agriculture or Community-Shared Agriculture to be found all over the world. C.O.S.A. has gradually grown to be part of a wider and more solid network, which today includes Lucca, *Newroz* Pisa, and Vecchiano. An important part of the project is the Organic Vegetable Box Scheme. The farmers involved are *Roberto Dones* (Massaciucoli), *Valter Bandoni* (Pieve S. Paolo), and *Radwan* (Titignano). The scheme works by subscription. Customers sign up to a weekly or a two-weekly delivery of the vegetable box at the price of 8 euros per box (average weight 3 kilos). The contents are selected by the farmers depending on seasonality and availability. By subscribing to the programme you help bring economic stability to the farms, allowing the farmers to concentrate on the work in the fields without having to worry about the sales.



Vegetable boxes by Valter Bandoni

OTHER PRODUCTS

You can subscribe for a weekly delivery of fish, which is provided by a local fisherman employing 100% sustainable fishing methods. Eggs are provided through weekly subscription too. Other products – like seasonal fruit, all sorts of dairy and baking products, herbs, sweets, pasta, flours, honey, meat, detergents, body-care products, and much more – can be ordered weekly through a Google site. The distance from producers to consumers is always very short. This helps the environment by keeping transportation to a minimum and packaging simple. Moreover, the absence of intermediaries takes the price speculation element out of the production chain.

DISTRIBUTING, COLLECTING, PARTICIPATING

The products are delivered on Wednesday from 6.30 to 7.30 p.m. at different spots around Lucca: Sant'Anna, Tempagnano, Sorbanello, Paganico. It is important to remember that this is a communal activity. When going to collect the goods it is nice to linger there, have a chat and exchange ideas. It is not like rushing in and out of a supermarket; it requires a different frame of mind. Distribution is done by the *gassisti* (members of the group) themselves on a voluntary basis. There is no obligation but it is nice to help and have an active role in the process. This is a very interesting aspect of the project; it allows you to be more than just an ethical consumer. Apart from helping with the distribution, you can take part in the decision making, the organizational process, and pricing, through direct contact with the farmers involved. This is possible especially thanks to the monthly meetings organized by the group. There is also an internet forum and a mailing-list that keeps you updated on various initiatives (in Covid times unfortunately reduced to the minimum), such as horticulture days and harvesting. In short, joining a G.A.S. group you can contribute to shaping the community in which you live.

– by Chiara Calabrese

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