

Local food can restart from Food Hubs

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The term has been circulating among professionals for around thirty years, and indeed the pioneers began creating the first food hubs as early as the late 1990s.

However, since digital technologies for building online platforms have become much simpler and more accessible—even for people with little digital literacy—it’s worth explaining once again **what Food Hubs are, what they’re for, how they work**, and above all **why they are more needed than ever today**.

“Hub” is an English word that originally means the **centerpiece of a wheel**—the part from which spokes radiate on a bicycle and where, in a car... well, something happens that makes the wheels turn and, when needed, stop.

If you've read *Foodsystem 5.0* by Alex Giordano (Edizioni Ambiente), you probably already have a clear idea of what Food Hubs are: **digital platforms** that act as **meeting and exchange points** between food demand and production in a specific area. They don't just manage the "matching," but also **logistics, organization, and sales**. Producers register on one side, potential buyers on the other, and in between is the platform that ensures the requested products leave the farms and reach their destination.

So, while metaphorically **Food Hubs can resemble many things** (a farmer's market, a CSA, a food coop), technically, to be defined as a Food Hub, **two key elements are essential**: a **digital platform** and a **local focus**.

Digital Platforms to Look Nearby

There are a few counterintuitive aspects that Food Hubs bring into play, **overturning how we usually think about technologies applied to the agri-food sector**, and they're worth reflecting on.

The first point, already mentioned, is the **unavoidable link a Food Hub must have with a specific territory**. Why "must"? Because by now, **anyone can sell food online**—just look at Amazon's supermarkets. If it were only about organization, logistics, and profit, there would be no need for a Food Hub. But **good organization is not the same as food quality**, nor sustainable production, nor fair economic models. Now that online buying and selling has become "normal," it's clearer than ever that **digital platforms are just tools**—they are not added value in and of themselves.

In fact, we're used to thinking of digital platforms as important because they let us connect with distant players. But if those players are part of the market machine, digital platforms can easily **become synonymous with CO₂ emissions** (avoidable by shopping locally), with **underpaid and overworked couriers**, and with **profits always ending up in the hands of the largest, most protected players**, often enjoying tax advantages.

However, by thinking of digital platforms this way, we risk ignoring how crucial they have become in **connecting actors who are very close but remain strangers to each other**. Why don't local food producers "team up"? Why do local consumers often not know them or prefer the convenience of buying food from big industries or wholesale markets?

So close, yet so far

There are several **practical reasons** for this.

- **Local producers are often invisible:** they lack the communication firepower of big companies, and don't have the time, means, or skills to make themselves known to consumers in their own area. Their promotion often relies on word-of-mouth or CSAs (Community Supported Agriculture), but that can only go so far. It's easier for a consumer to hear about a multinational's new organic product line than to find lettuce from a good grower 3 km away in a village off their usual route.
- **And then there's a seemingly simple fact:** farmers live in the countryside with their products. The products of multinationals and the food industry, instead, **reach the city regularly and easily**, thanks not only to logistics but to the **industrial system's immunity to waste**. Always stocking store shelves is a commandment: even if 30% gets wasted, it's no problem—they still profit from the remaining 70%, since **their production costs are minimal**.

Meanwhile, **small-scale, quality farmers** in our region **can't afford any waste**, lack an efficient distribution system, and only reach city markets if and when they manage to access rare niche outlets. For those producing unprocessed fruit or vegetables, this is practically impossible.

Easy supply chains

From these first points, **the key role of Food Hubs becomes clear:** to **make local producers visible**—to themselves, to each other, and to consumers. More than that: to make them **accessible**, making it **as easy to buy their products as it is to buy industrial food**.

Shortening supply chains **shouldn't mean adding burdens to the shoulders of someone already struggling** with a different food system. Yes, supply chains must be short—but also **light, easy**.

This is where the big industry has crushed small-scale, sustainable producers for decades: with convenience.

A Food Hub can bring this **ease** into buying **local, sustainable, and high-quality food**, restoring to that purchase **its sense of meaning, identity, and awareness**—something we’ve largely lost when it comes to food choices.

Small-Scale farming and technology: can it work?

The second counterintuitive idea concerns the belief that **technology is inherently at odds with artisanal production**. It’s not an unreasonable thought—if **technology’s goal is only higher volumes**. But technology can also be used to **improve the quality of artisanal products** (as happened with extra virgin olive oil), or, as with Food Hubs, to **better distribute and utilize those products**, starting in their own territories.

In summary:

- **It’s not true that digital platforms only connect distant players.**
- **It’s not true that technology must be the enemy of quality.**

A shared project is needed to build a food hub

So is it all solved? Can Food Hubs grow and—most importantly—multiply?

No.

And in fact, there are still few of them. But the ones that exist and work well are **models to study and replicate**, found in cities like Rome or in active regions like Tuscany.

Unlike CSAs or farmer’s markets, Food Hubs **can’t rely on individual goodwill**.

Remember? Their goal is to create **local short supply chains** that don’t place the burden of their functioning on the people involved.

As someone who coordinates a CSA, I know exactly **how much time, patience, and energy it takes** to ensure that 30 families get oranges, olive oil, tomato sauce, radicchio... When someone asks me, *“Why do you do it? At least charge a commission!”*, I reply that **I’m a journalist with a VAT number, I can’t sell food**. But more importantly, **this is my form of politics**—and, at the same time, **food education**, which again, is politics.

Standing by good producers, defending our food and our planet, showing that buying food **can and should be a complex, beautiful, fertile act**—that’s a personal choice.

But a **Food Hub cannot depend on individual choices.**

A Food Hub **builds or rebuilds relationships** within the **local production and consumption fabric**. These connections are **numerous and delicate**—they require **care, attention, professionalism, and vision**.

A Food Hub can't work if it's the **political act of one person**. It works if it's the **political action of a whole territory**—its producers, its administrators, its citizens, its entrepreneurs.

No surprise, then, that successful Food Hubs are the ones supplying **school cafeterias**, or are used by **restaurant consortia**, or connected to **retirement homes, workplace cafeterias, or employee meal vouchers**.

A food hub needs more than goodwill

To be born, a Food Hub needs:

- **a shared planning table,**
- **clear choices,**
- **and a radical shift in development models.**

It needs **political will**—one that acknowledges our **environmental, economic, and social crisis**, and recognizes that **food, and how we produce and consume it, can rewrite the rules** of how we live together, building community with other human beings and with **plants, animals, and ecosystems** that share our land, air, and water.

Let's try imagining the kind of **Food Hub our territory needs**—one that could strengthen and reinvent itself as a **driver of health, economy, employment, social equity, and ecology**.

It's **not a hobby**, not a nice thing to do in our spare time.

It **must be** the **place where the visions of administrators, associations, researchers, citizens, producers, and entrepreneurs converge**, to move forward in defense of the common good.

Further reading:

- *Alex Giordano, Foodsystem 5.0*, Edizioni Ambiente, 2023 — esp. chapter 5

- *Giaime Berti & Pippo Russo*, “Food hubs revolutionize distribution”, in *Domani*, August 9, 2023

Fonte: <https://www.ruralhack.org/en/food-hubs-local-food-future/>