



La Buona Mensa - Qualità e Servizi: Inclusive short food supply chain canteen for school meals

**Good practice for Sustainable Food
Systems in a circular economy
perspective**

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✓ La Buona Mensa - Qualità e Servizi

📍 Tuscany Region, Italy

★ Public administration-led



THE CHALLENGE

Calenzano (18,270 inh.), Campi Bisenzio (48,000 inh.), Carmignano (14,600 inh.), Signa (19,000 inh.), Sesto Fiorentino (48,750 inh.) and Barberino del Mugello (11,000 inh.) are 6 municipalities in the region of Tuscany, Italy, spread between the provinces of Florence and Prato. Overall, they account for a population of nearly 160,000 people. The challenge that these 6 municipalities decided to embark on, and which they achieved to successfully meet, was to have a reliable publicly-owned company providing school meals to the children enrolled in daycare (0-3 years), kindergarten (3-6 years) and primary (6-10 years) education across the 6 municipalities

THE CONCEPT

The challenge started in 2017 when, under the leadership of the then mayor of Sesto Fiorentino - Mr. Lorenzo Falchi - the search for a new manager for the company running the provision of school meals was launched. The vision was to set up a system which could offer good quality, healthy and tasty food to students in daycare, kindergarten and primary education, sourcing food from local producers, and hence sustaining the local economy and the local communities, creating an economy of relations around the service of food provision to schools. All this through a fully public service. In this model, tight connections are created between the local food producers, the food processors (the industrial canteen), the students and their families, the schools, the public authorities responsible for the provision of meals, and the natural environment. In this conception of “food community” (IT: comunità del cibo), culture, health, employment, society and environment are the five pillars around which the concept and the practice have been built.



La Buona Mensa - Qualità e Servizi

THE CONCEPT

Qualità e Servizi (hereafter Q&S) is the publicly-owned industrial canteen company, headquartered in Calenzano, which processes the food and prepares the school meals. Pupils in school are fed quality food, while being conscious of the relationship between their nutrition and the resources offered by their territory and its people. Meanwhile, the work of local food producers is valued by the community. Farmers and producers are paid a fair price, which is above the market value that they would be paid if their products would be bought by intermediaries supplying the large distribution system. At the same time, the industrial canteen buys a product - directly from the producer - which is cheaper as compared to buying the same product from suppliers in the market, healthier, less-carbon intensive, and which equally has a non-monetary intrinsic value represented by the fact of supporting the existence of the local community through the establishment of tight and reliable relations with local producers.

Example of the win-win situation for the purchase of 1kg of broccoli

	Large distribution	Qualità e Servizi
Purchase price paid to the farmer by (farmer selling price)	1,20 EUR/kg	1,80 EUR/kg
Purchase price paid by Qualità e Servizi (Qualità e Servizi buying for meals preparation)	2,30 EUR/kg	1,80 EUR/kg

This is a win-win situation where not only producers and the canteen financially benefit, but where students eat healthy food, and where food waste is reduced to nearly zero, both at the level of meals consumption (school canteens), and at the farm level. Here indeed food losses are reduced to the minimum as a flexible demand-supply system has been set in place where the farmer communicates to Qualità e Servizi which products he/she has readily available, and the canteen adjusts the seasonal menus to be able to acquire the food items that are ready from the field. In this way the farmer is able to sell all of his/her production to the Q&S, being able to account for the natural variation in timing for crop maturity, and to the yields which naturally fluctuate across the years, and the seasons. Should the farmer had to sell his/her products to the large distribution channels, s/he would have lost some of its production (food left on the field) as that product would have been too ripe to be brought to the market.



☑ La Buona Mensa - Qualità e Servizi

THE CONCEPT

The functioning of the Qualità e Servizi canteen has the purpose of “re-valuing” all the interconnectivity between locally available, quality food and the health of the students who - every day - receive meals at the school canteens. The practice gives dignity to all the workers involved in the process, from the food producers to the food processor, and allows the primary sector producers to be custodians of biodiversity and the environment, preventing farmers to abandon farming, and small fishermen to abandoned fishing because it is not profitable, and teaching young generations the value of land, sea, food and people.

This model also provides a financial saving to the state, through the saving made by the public authorities who have to ensure the delivery of the food service. This is because in most cases, part of the price of school meals is subsidized by the government, therefore a lower price, means a lower share of subsidy to be paid.

In this model, there is also another important cost saving, and that is on the management of the environment. By ensuring that local producers make a living out of their activity, these actors remain on the territory, and take care of their wellbeing, often practicing sustainable farming practices which are beneficial to the environment, from land to sea. Small farmers therefore become managers of the environment on which they rely on, and custodians of the rich biodiversity of the region.

THE PRACTICE - TOOL

In 2017, the mayors of 3 municipalities (Sesto Fiorentino, Campi Bisenzio, Signa) have joined forces to re-launch the operability and profitability of a fully publicly-owned service company delivering school meals to primary schools in the 3 municipalities. By 2021, other 3 municipalities (Calenzano, Carmignano, Barberino del Mugello) had joined the partnership. As of 2023, 68% of the food is sourced locally from local small-scale producers who have been invited to enter into contractual agreements with the company for the direct supply of food items for the school canteens, all year round. This created a tight interconnect web of suppliers, strengthening the network of local (regional) food suppliers. The suppliers eventually united into a producers consortium to better coordinate their supply with Qualità & Servizi. Fresh food is brought to the company’s premises on a daily basis, and then it is processed into school meals. Meals are delivered to the students, who are part of an awareness raising and educational program on nutrition. Data on food consumption patterns are reported daily into a database, and analyzed for further improvement. Food waste at dish level is reduced by half, and food losses at primary production are nearly null.

The canteen staff (250 employees) uses traditional recipes to prepare the meals, which follow 4 seasonal menus to respond to the seasonal cycle of food production. Canteen staff has been trained on food quality assurance protocols, but also on healthy menu preparation. They also receive training to understand the overall functioning of the supply-processing-consumption system. This to enhance their ownership of the process and to identify with the good practice they are performing.



THE PRACTICE - TOOL

In the canteens work cooks, kitchen staff, hygiene experts and food technicians. Overall 12 canteens prepare around 10,000 meals per day, including meals for school children, and meals for an elderly house where 70 guests are living (Villa Solaria residence). To limit the amount of food being wasted, the school canteens adjusting portions to suit children-size dishes, and constantly (on a daily basis) monitor what children leave on their dishes, and why. A database system has been established to this purpose where kitchen staff and teachers report on a daily basis the amounts of food discarded by students, and the reasons why they did not appreciate the food. Cooks in the kitchen then analyze the data provided and adjust the receipt to better suit the taste of children.



For day-care and kindergarten, 9 kitchens are installed within the school premises. Here the food is prepared on the spot every day. Two other large semi-industrial kitchens are located in the municipality of Calenzano and another one in the city of Carmignano. Overall they prepare 1,800 meals per day which are later distributed to the primary education schools in the 6 municipalities.

This circular, inclusive and participative models also foresees a component of nutritional education for children, where kitchen staff along teachers sit together with the students during the lunch break, and explain them the properties of the food they are eating, where it comes from, and how that affects their wellbeing. This way, children become aware actors of change, and they naturally report the learning back to the families, which in turn learn from their children about the importance of eating healthy and fair food.

With the aim to constantly improve the quality of the service, Qualità & Servizi runs a database where every day they collect 24,000 inputs, coming from kitchen staff and school teachers, who collect information from the students (quality and tastiness of food, reasons for discarding, suggestions for improving the menus and for new receipts, etc.). The development of inclusive processes as this one shows how this innovative system of integrating awareness into the value of food, from production to consumption, managed to reduce food waste at schools by nearly 50% compared to the national average. In the schools served by Qualità & Servizi indeed, the amount of food waste is equivalent to 34%, while the national average is unfortunately as high as 50%.

THE PRACTICE - TOOL

The provision of an equilibrated diet is ensured through the employment of seasonal food and the support of dietary specialists and cooks. The nutritional education program also includes fun activities for children, like the “Assaggiatori Coraggiosi (Brave tasters)” program where children are called upon to taste and evaluate new receipts developed by the school canteens. Based also on this concept, the philosophy of Qualità & Servizi is now evolving from a purely industrial school meals production stand to a “high quality food for children” perspective, where the quality of the meal is seen as a fundamental process to attract children and young generations towards the consumption of healthy (and tasty) food. Since 2017, the company shares the principle of the Slow Food Movement for a tasty, clean and fair food (cibo buono, pulito ed equo), applying this approach from the suppliers to the kitchen premises.

68% of the food is sourced locally, from producers and food suppliers operating in the provinces of the Tuscany region. This way, vegetables, fruits, bread, oil, pasta, meat and fish are all sourced from short supply chains, with most of the production meeting organic agriculture criteria.

Sourcing food locally, from small-scale producers also give the opportunity to maintain alive important cultural traditions related to food production. This is the case for example of bread and pasta produced with flour from traditional stone grain milling (IT: mulini a pietra), where grains from ancient crops are still being cultivated.

ACTORS

The main actors who of this practice are:

- The mayors of the 6 municipalities of Calenzano (18,270 inh.), Campi Bisenzio (48,000 inh.), Carmignano (14,600 inh.), Signa (19,000 inh.), Sesto Fiorentino (48,750 inh.) and Barberino del Mugello (11,000 inh.) in the region of Tuscany, Italy, spread between the provinces of Florence and Prato. Overall, these 6 municipalities account for a population of nearly 160,000 people;
- The public-owned industrial food processing canteen “Qualità e Servizi”, its 250 employees, and its visionary director, Mr. Antonio Ciappi;
- The farmers, fishermen, breeders, dairy products producers, wheat, pasta and bread producers, oil producers which united into a producers consortium, to better coordinate the supply of food items to Qualità e Servizi. By sharing the task of supplying food to the canteen, the members of the consortium support each other through a coordination mechanism where e.g. if a farmer had a decrease in production due to adverse climate conditions, his/her forgone supply is provided by another farmer of the consortium who has not been affected by the climate adverse event. Overall, the Consortium gathers 14 primary sector producers, all operating within the provinces of the Tuscany region;
- 7 local food suppliers of locally-produced processed food like pasta, bread, cheese;
- 70 schools (daycare, kindergarten and primary education level)
- 1 elderly residence

REGULATORY ASPECTS



A supportive regulatory aspect has been the new Italian public procurement regulation for healthy food provision in school canteens. According to the latter, meals provided to students in schools shall provide priority to sourcing from short supply chains. Qualità and Servizi has adhered to this regulation. Moreover, to enhance their connectivity and reliability with civil society, the company has fully embraced the practice of “public administration transparency” (IT: amministrazione trasparente) where revenues generated by the company and its suppliers are publicly available on the company website.

GEOGRAPHIC COVERAGE



This practice engages the public administrations of 6 municipalities in the area of the Metropolitan City of Florence, and the province of Prato. These municipalities are: Calenzano (18,270 inh.), Campi Bisenzio (48,000 inh.), Carmignano (14,600 inh.), Signa (19,000 inh.), Sesto Fiorentino (48,750 inh.) and Barberino del Mugello (11,000 inh.). Overall, these 6 municipalities account for a population of nearly 160,000 people.

Primary food producers and suppliers are from the Tuscany Region, with products being sourced, from land to sea, across the 10 administrative provinces that compose it.



Tuscany Region, location of the good practice

VOLUMES / OUTCOME / IMPACT GENERATED/ QUANTIFICATION



A few numbers to describe the impact of this action are:

- About 10,000 students served meals every day during the school year;
- 2 semi-industrial canteens preparing:
 - Calenzano canteen1: 7,500 meals per day for 70 schools and 6 aggregation centers;
 - Calenzano canteen2: 1,000 meals for 10 schools of the Calenzano municipality;
 - Carmignano canteen: 700 meals for 7 school of the Carmignano municipality
- 1 canteen preparing 210 meals a day for an elderly residence of 70 residents;
- 9 school canteens, one for each of the 9 daycare/kindergarten municipal schools, preparing overall 650 meals per day;
- 250 employers of Qualità e Servizi, including cooks, kitchen staff, canteen personnel, drivers and office staff;
- 10 food distribution electric vans
- 4 tons of meals distributed every day
- 50 food suppliers, 18 of which from the local food supply chain;
- 250 samples analyzed every year to ensure that food safety criteria from supplied food are met on a constant basis;

BARRIERS TO PRACTICE IMPLEMENTATION

“Tutto è difficile prima di diventare facile”

Mariagrazia Piliero, Primary school teacher of the Calenzano Don Milani primary school

In the words of Mariagrazia Piliero, primary school teacher of the Calenzano school Don Milani, “everything is difficult before turning easy”. This is the philosophy embraced by the actors engaged in the establishment of the successful case of Qualità e Servizi. As in any other case, they were faced with implementation and adoption barriers, but their willingness to build value for society by providing healthy, locally-sourced meals for children in their territories, made them find ways to overcome these barriers and work towards the shared aim of Qualità & Servizi.

WINNING ASPECTS OF THE PRACTICE



“Uno può dare il massimo quando si riconosce in quello che fa”

“One can give the best of himself/herself once he recognizes himself/herself in the work s/he does”

Elisa Galanti, Food Quality technician Qualità e Servizi

This sentence embraces the essence of the Qualità & Servizi best practice example: a widespread ownership - across all actors - of the entire process, from the farmer producing the carrots, to the kitchen staff turning it into a tasty soup, to the teachers who explain the properties of Apiaceae plants, the students who eat it, and to the families of the students who learn from their children.

Generally speaking, multiple are the factors that made this practice a win-win case for sustainable food systems. First of all, there has been the vision of the Sesto Fiorentino mayors and his colleagues who joined forces to revitalize the publicly-owned company for meals preparation. Secondly, the leadership of the new director of Qualità & Servizi who, as a cook, knew very well the value of the local resources, and invested in the quality and passion of the local farmers and food producers to embrace them in the system.

Third, the use of the smart contract for the supply of the food has played a mayor role in, on the one hand, ensuring a constant food supply to the canteen and, on the other, provide producer with a fair pay, which is a recognition of their daily work, increasing their motivation to be part of the (local) system. This contractual arrangement also allowed to significantly reduce food losses in primary production, and food waste in the schools' canteens. Indeed, a relevant aspect of the practice is the nearly complete reduction in food losses and food waste. This is because there is a direct link between food producer and the final consumer, with the farmer having the possibility to sell a higher amount of food to the canteen company when his/her crop is ready for harvest, and can not be left in the field. With tasty food produced with passion and supplied to pupils at school, food waste in the dishes is also reduced to the minimum as children like the food being prepared for them.

Last but not least, passion is the main driver of action for this best practice. This is a highly participated process, where people engaged in the different activities do care about the actions they are carrying out, recognizing the value that this brings to the community. Farmers are passionate to produce products which are later eaten by their children and by other children in the community. Cooks at Qualità e Servizi are passionate about using local healthy products to produce tasty meals, because food is part of their cultural identity. Children are happy to receive tasty food from the neighborhood. Their families are reassured their children receive healthy food, precious for their growth and nourishment. Mayors are proud of having sat up an “economy of community” system where the reliance on the short supply chain and the expertise of local people is providing a benefit for society and the environment.

Over the years, the succesfullness of the model has attracted new actors in the system, preserving existing jobs and creating new job opportunities in the food supply chain.

As a result of this success, currently (July 2023) the whole of the Metropolitan city of Florence (985,000 inhabitants) is now considering becoming a beneficiary of the services provided by Qualità & Servizi, a proof that - when well managed - locally-sourced and locally-processed good quality food can be provided at a lower cost, and with high social, economic and environmental value, to local communities and society.



CONTACT DETAILS

Qualità e Servizi company: <http://www.qualitaeservizi.com/>

Mr. Antonio Ciappi, former Managing Director of Qualità e Servizi, Kitchen Chef

Mr. Filippo Fossati, Financial administrator of Qualità e Servizi

Comune di Sesto Fiorentino: <https://www.comune.sesto-fiorentino.fi.it/>

SIMILAR PRACTICES IN OTHER TERRITORIES

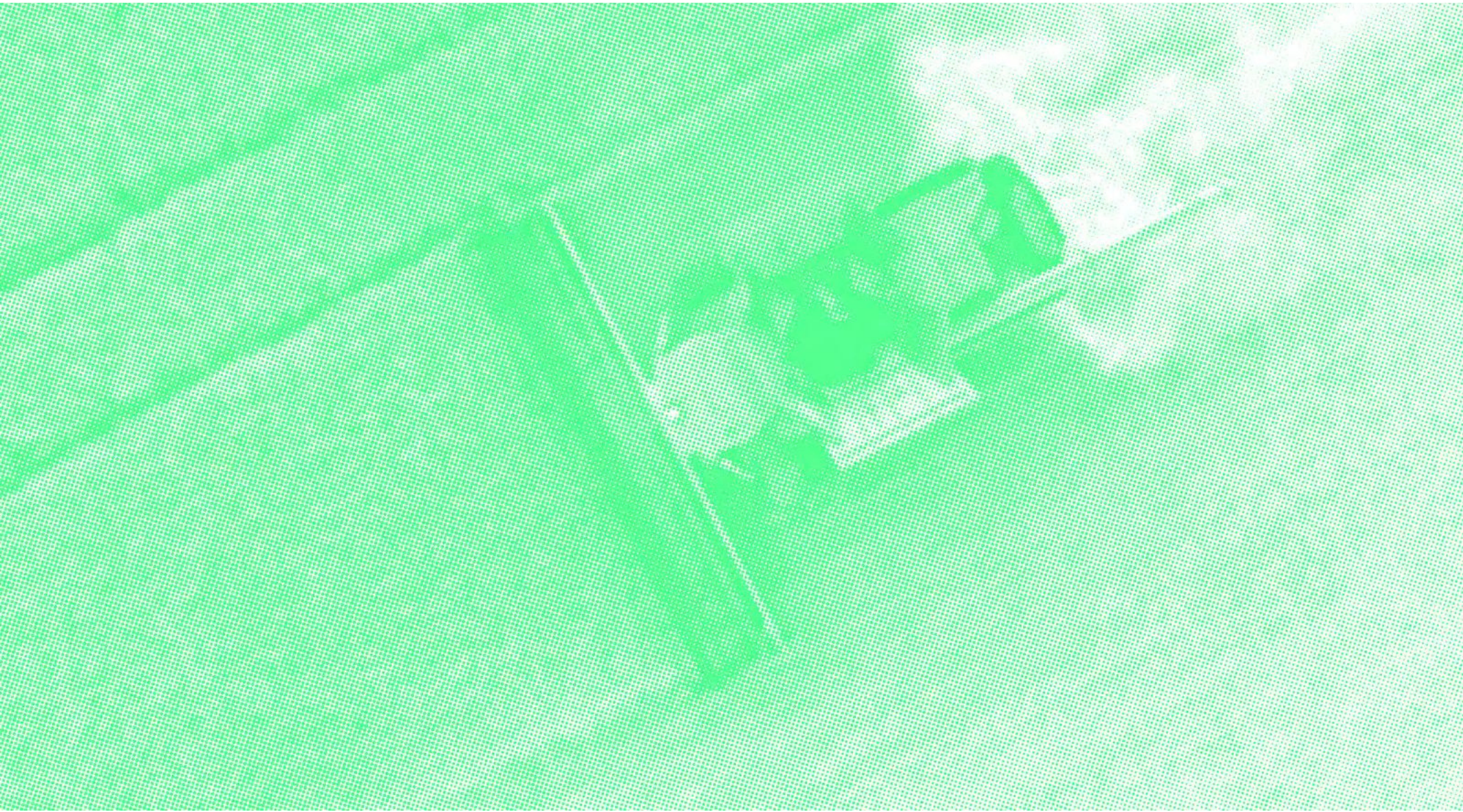
Denmark- FOODOP (www.foodop.dk) business tool: IT-based tool for prevention of food losses in canteens. Measurement of food consumption and food waste in food servings, analysis of data, feedback informatino to canteens' kitchen for improvement and adjustment of menus. More info here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRbwClRb_w0

CREDITS

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