









Article

Sustainable Food Practices: Exploring Alterity in a Rural Mediterranean Ethical Meatscape

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of alterity within “ethical” meat production and consumption, focusing on small-scale producers and consumers in a rural Mediterranean context. Drawing on a relational understanding of alterity as a process through which actors negotiate difference within capitalist foodscapes, the study examines how ethical commitments and socio-material practices co-produce what counts as “alternative.” Using qualitative interviews with producers of “ethical meat” and their consumers from a solidarity-based Alternative Food Network (AFN) in Le Marche (Italy), the paper investigates how producer–consumer relations, animal welfare, and ecological care are interlinked within an ethical meatscape. Despite differing perceptions of the AFN’s role, embodied exchanges and face-to-face trust emerge as key to sustaining ethical and environmentally conscious practices. By capturing the micro-social dynamics through which relational alterity is enacted, the paper contributes to debates on sustainable agri-food transitions and socio-environmental justice, showing how ethical and ecological outcomes are co-produced through human and more-than-human relations.

Keywords: sustainable agri-food systems; ethical meat systems; producer–consumer interactions; alternative food network; animal welfare; socio-ecological relations



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1. Introduction

The environmental, social, and ethical impacts of conventional meat systems underscore the complexity of agri-food systems and highlight the unsustainability of current patterns of meat consumption. Extensive research has documented the sector’s contribution to deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, and water pollution, as well as its association with animal welfare concerns and labour exploitation across the supply chain [1–4]. Industrial operations, driven by economies of scale and market consolidation, exacerbate these challenges while marginalizing small-scale producers, limiting the diversity of production practices and consumer choices. These dynamics illustrate how meat production and consumption are shaped by interconnected ecological, economic, and social processes, raising urgent questions about pathways towards more sustainable practices. In response to these concerns, alternative “ethical” meat initiatives—such as grass-fed, hormone-free, or organic production—have emerged as attempts to reconcile environmental stewardship, animal welfare, and producer responsibility with consumer demand. Driven by a myriad

of different motivations and values, actors involved in such initiatives embrace normative ideals, including the fact that sustainably raised animal products are pivotal for human health (focusing on the higher nutritional value of organic, free-range produced meat), can contribute to a positive ecological footprint, foster improved animal welfare, and have the potential of revitalizing rural economies. We conceptualize these initiatives as part of an “ethical meatscape”: a socio-material landscape encompassing the environments in which animals are raised, the labour and knowledge invested in production, and the cultural and ethical narratives shaping both producer and consumer choices.

Scholarship on Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) has provided valuable insights into how localized, ethical, and sustainable food initiatives seek to reconfigure dominant food regimes. Yet, as Blumberg et al. [1] argue, framing AFNs simply as ethical or spatial “alternatives” to mainstream systems risks becoming a conceptual trap, where analysis should focus on how “alternativeness” is made, maintained, or undone. Recent work on ethical meat imaginaries has offered important contributions in this regard, showing how producers construct moral boundaries and imagine their consumers within broader cultural repertoires of ethics and sustainability [2,3]. Building on these insights, this study extends the focus beyond producers and moves past viewing ethical meat networks as inherently alternative, instead examining how alterity itself is enacted—how producers and consumers within an ethical meatscape construct, perform, and contest the moral boundaries that distinguish “ethical” from “conventional” meat. In doing so, it reframes alterity as a relational and imaginative process, rather than a fixed characteristic of particular markets or practices, and situates it in the everyday interactions through which these distinctions are lived and negotiated.

While AFN research has matured conceptually, the micro-social dynamics underpinning sustainable food transitions remain under-investigated. Much of the literature privileges structural or meso-level analyses—of governance arrangements, value chains, and scaling processes [4,5]—while paying less attention to the everyday cultural and affective work through which ethical food practices acquire meaning. Goodman et al. [6] and Tregear [7] highlight this gap, urging scholars to explore the motivations, identities, and social relations that animate AFNs. Similarly, practice-based transition theorists emphasize that sustainability change depends on the situated routines and meanings of actors [8,9]. Relational sociology and practice-oriented perspectives [10] further underscore the importance of attending to how everyday social interactions co-construct ethical norms, responsibilities, and collective subjectivities. Yet empirical studies still rarely trace how participants themselves negotiate ethical difference in practice, particularly in contexts that combine both producer and consumer imaginaries.

Against this backdrop, this study turns to the everyday spaces where ethical commitments are enacted and negotiated, examining how producers and consumers co-construct difference within a small Mediterranean ethical meatscape. While existing literature has thoroughly explored macro-level issues related to ethical meatscapes—such as the political economy of industrial meat systems [11], speciesism and capitalism [12], ethical consumption [13], and the promises and critiques of cultivated meat [14]—studies that closely examine the everyday, micro-social relations between producers and consumers remain relatively scarce. A growing body of research has addressed consumer motivations and ethical concerns [15,16], and some scholarship has explored direct relationships in AFNs, such as those fostered in GAS in Italy [17,18] or short food supply chains in France and Brazil [19]. However, few studies have focused specifically on the interpersonal dynamics, such as trust-building, emotional labour, and co-construction of ethical meaning that characterize ethical meat exchanges.

Drawing on qualitative in-depth interviews with producers and members of a solidarity-based AFN in Le Marche (Italy), we analyse how direct, unmediated exchanges of meat are experienced and narrated. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, this study focuses on depth, reflexivity, and relational insight, using a small sample to illuminate the lived processes through which ethical imaginaries of meat are co-produced, stabilized, and sometimes contested. We ask whether producers and consumers perceive themselves as working towards shared goals, how their ethical imaginaries converge or diverge, and what forms of trust, responsibility, and empathy emerge in their interactions with each other, with animals, and with the environment. In doing so, we foreground the ways in which face-to-face relations de-commodify meat and sustain ethical commitments, while also revealing the tensions and contingencies that characterize these encounters. We draw on Blumberg et al.'s [1] conceptual framework of alterity and the geographical political ecology of food systems to frame ethical meatscapes as relational and emergent: alterity is not a fixed attribute but is co-constructed through everyday interactions, spatial practices, and ethical imaginaries. This lens allows us to examine how micro-social exchanges between producers and consumers enact alterity while linking these practices to broader social, ecological, and sustainability outcomes. Examining how these imaginaries are enacted and transformed through this lens reveals the everyday micro-politics of alterity, contributing to re-embedding analyses of food ethics and sustainability in the lived, relational, and power-laden practices through which they take form. By attending to these processes, this paper contributes to ongoing debates on sustainable agri-food systems, particularly the interconnections between agricultural production and consumer behaviour that underpin the search for more socially and environmentally just food futures.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next subsection of this introduction (Section “Ethical Meat in the Mediterranean Context”) sets the scene by outlining the nutritional, ethical, and environmental qualities of meat that producers and consumers foreground in a Mediterranean ethical meatscape to situate the case study. Section 2 introduces the materials and methods of the case study and outlines the qualitative methodology. Section 3 presents the empirical findings, followed by a discussion in Section 4. Section 5 concludes with reflections on the implications for sustainable food system transformation.

Ethical Meat in the Mediterranean Context

Understanding how producers and consumers enact alterity within ethical meatscapes requires attention to the nutritional, ethical, and environmental qualities of meat, which inform the values and choices underlying non-industrial production and consumption. Meat has long been a vital source of essential nutrients, including high-quality protein, vitamin B12, iron, and zinc, which are crucial for human health and development. However, as global dietary patterns increasingly align with a “Western” high-protein model, and as plant-based alternatives gain traction, the role of meat in diets has come under closer scrutiny. Within an ethical meatscape, the question of whether and how much meat should be consumed is an important consideration, shaped by both health and environmental concerns. Generally, advocates recognize meat as a significant source of essential amino acids and micronutrients, but they also acknowledge the health risks associated with excessive consumption of red and processed meats, such as an increased risk of certain cancers [20,21]. This dual perspective underscores the need for a balanced approach to meat consumption—one that maximizes nutritional benefits while minimizing health risks. The growing body of literature on the health implications of meat consumption has prompted calls for more sustainable and health-conscious dietary practices [22–24].

In the context of the Mediterranean Diet (MD), traditionally the cornerstone of nutrition in Mediterranean countries, the emphasis on moderate meat consumption remains

pivotal. However, the MD now faces challenges from the rise in unhealthy eating habits linked to global acculturation [25]. The MD advocates for limiting meat consumption to less than two servings per week, preferably lean cuts, and recommends limiting processed meats to fewer than one serving per week [26]. While red meat is part of this dietary pattern, the MD emphasizes quality over quantity, with a focus on sourcing from sustainable and local producers, thus offering a valuable model of “less but better”. This philosophy aligns with what can be considered broader ethical meatscape principles, promoting environmental sustainability, improving nutritional quality, and supporting small, local farmers. In this sense, the alterity of meat consumption within an ethical Mediterranean meatscape may involve numerous factors reconciling traditional dietary practices with contemporary concerns about sustainability, health, and the socio-economic empowerment of local producers. By reducing meat intake while prioritizing high-quality, locally sourced products, values pivot around the intersection of nutrition, environmental impact, and community well-being.

Ethical considerations within such a meatscape centre on examining the complex interplay between moral values, consumption habits, and the long-term well-being of individuals, animals, and the planet. Care ethics emphasizes empathy, relationships, and responsibility—applied to human interactions with other humans, animals, and the environment. This perspective challenges individuals to consider the moral implications of their dietary choices, advocating for practices that minimize harm and actively promote animal welfare. For instance, choosing meat from animals raised in respectful conditions—such as grass-fed, free-range, and pasture-raised systems—ensures animals can express natural behaviours and live in environments suited to their species. Ethical meatscapes emphasize animal agency and reduced stress in contrast to intensive farming practices, widely criticized for their inhumane treatment of animals (including confinement, mutilations, and lack of access to natural behaviours) [27,28].

The alterity “credentials” of ethical meatscape production in relation to environmental sustainability are often tied to its support for regenerative agricultural practices. Unlike industrial livestock systems, which contribute significantly to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and soil degradation [1,29], ethical meat initiatives emphasize holistic land management approaches that restore ecosystems while maintaining livestock production, applying biosecurity measures according to the “One Health” perspective. Regenerative grazing, for instance, is promoted as a means to enhance soil fertility, increase carbon sequestration, and improve water retention [30,31]. However, while regenerative practices bolster ethical meat’s environmental legitimacy, their actual impact is widely debated—linked to local ecological conditions, scale, and governance structures, and raising questions about the extent to which these initiatives can truly disrupt industrial paradigms [32].

These nutritional, ethical, and environmental considerations are not enacted in isolation, but are embedded within broader organizational and social frameworks, of which AFNs are one prominent example, structuring the production, distribution, and consumption of ethical meat. In Italy, “Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale” (GAS) [solidarity purchasing groups] represent a significant form of AFN, embodying a variety of social, economic, and environmental concerns. These solidarity purchasing groups consist of groups of individuals and families who manage the direct purchase of food products in a participatory and collective way. As self-organized citizen groups, they rely on volunteers to coordinate activities, with referenti [reference volunteers] taking on the responsibility of coordinating purchasing and delivery with small, local, organic, and socially-ecologically responsible producers. Though GAS initiatives vary widely, solidarity is consistently invoked as their defining principle—a concept whose practical enactment provides a crucial lens for examining alterity.

After considering the nutritional, ethical, and environmental foundations that inform actors' choices within ethical meatscapes, we now turn to the methodological approach and case study context through which these dynamics were examined.

2. Materials and Methods

The study employed a qualitative methodology to explore the micro-social dynamics, ethical imaginaries, and relational practices of small-scale ethical meat production and consumption in the Marche region of Italy. Methodologically, the study adopts an interpretive approach, focusing on a small set of in-depth encounters and drawing on ethnographic sensibilities—attention to situated practice, reflexivity, and context—while not claiming full ethnographic immersion. It aligns with calls for micro-social and relational analyses in sustainability transitions and AFN research [7,8], where small-scale, interpretive studies illuminate the everyday enactment of ethical and sustainable food practices.

The decision to focus on this geographical area was based on several methodological considerations: its prominence in local meat production, the diversity of meat products, and its rich cultural and culinary traditions surrounding meat. The province of Macerata is particularly renowned for cattle and pig farming, including the prized “Marchigiana” cattle breed, celebrated for high-quality meat, while widespread pig breeding contributes to iconic products such as “ciauscolo,” a traditional sausage exemplifying local craftsmanship and flavours. According to the latest census conducted by the regional GAS network, ten GAS currently operate in Macerata province. In-depth interviews were conducted with three small-scale ethical meat producers selling organic, free-range, and cruelty-free animal products directly to their clients, as reported in Table 1. The GAS represents between 20–50% of their client base, with the remainder sold primarily to individual households; a minimal portion is sold to restaurants, schools, and organic shops. Two producers are certified organic and have been at the forefront of the region's ethical meatscape over the past 30–40 years, while one younger producer is involved in EU-level dialogues on sustainable farming practices. All producers are actively engaged in socio-economic and cultural debates surrounding ethical meat production.

Table 1. Main traits of the three farms of the study (year 2024).

	Farm 1	Farm 2	Farm 3
Animal Species:	Cattle: breeds: n. 35 fattening: n. 30 Swine: breeds: n. 10 fattening: n. 60	Cattle: breeds: n. 40 fattening: n. 50 Swine: breeds: n. 8 fattening: n. 62	Cattle: breeds: n. 0 fattening: n. 30
Method of production	Semi-intensive (stable and free-range)	Semi-intensive (stable and free-range)	Semi-intensive (stable and free-range)
Feeding type	Organic	Organic	Organic
Sale of the products	On site, online	Home delivery, online for GAS	On site, home delivery, online for GAS

Source: authors' elaboration.

Consumers were recruited through local GAS networks: representatives contacted members who regularly purchased meat from these producers, and those who expressed interest were then contacted directly by the researcher to arrange interviews. This process resulted in eleven consumer and three producer interviews conducted in 2024. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted using a protocol designed to elicit detailed

and reflective responses. Producer interviews explored farm practices, values guiding production decisions, relationships with consumers and GAS members, and the role of solidarity. Consumer interviews focused on motivations for joining a GAS, ethical and environmental values associated with meat consumption, perceptions of producers, and reflections on community and solidarity. Interviews were conducted primarily face-to-face, and a small number were conducted by phone. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, transcribed verbatim, anonymised, and stored securely. Voice memos and field notes complemented transcriptions to support reflexive analysis, and informed consent was obtained prior to each interview.

Transcripts were analysed using an inductive thematic approach [33]. Initial coding was conducted manually to capture recurring ideas, values, and experiences related to ethical meat production and consumption. Codes were iteratively grouped into broader thematic categories, which were refined through successive rounds of comparison across producer and consumer interviews. Key patterns were re-tested against the full dataset to ensure consistency, and direct quotations were retained to foreground participants' voices. Analytical decisions were discussed collectively within the interdisciplinary research team to address potential interpretive bias and enhance rigour. Differences in disciplinary perspectives prompted reflexive discussions about coding, theme selection, and representation of participant narratives.

To situate this analysis within a broader regional context, the study drew on complementary interview material from a separate mapping study of 47 GAS groups across the Marche region, conducted by the same researcher. These 20 min structured interviews collected basic information about each GAS and included questions on how participants conceptualize and enact solidarity through group activities. Although these interviews did not explicitly address meat consumption, they provided valuable contextual insights into consumer–producer relations, solidarity-based consumption, helping to frame the case study within the wider landscape of AFNs in the region. Findings from this mapping study helped confirm relational patterns observed in the case study and provided a broader reference point for interpreting micro-social dynamics.

3. Results

3.1. Conceptualization of the “Alterity” of Meat in an Ethical Meatscape

All interviewees, both producers and consumers, consistently linked alterity of the meat consumed and produced as being linked to animal welfare—to the “life lived by the animal” and the appropriateness of the animal's conditions, involving a “life without suffering” within an ethical meatscape. For consumers, the flavour, taste, and nutritional benefits of animal food products are all linked to respecting the natural conditions and patterns of behaviour of the animals. “To be healthy, the animal must live in open air, must eat grass, it must move and be offered a series of appropriate conditions” (interviewee 3). One consumer states: “What makes the difference is the fact that the animal is guaranteed a certain diet, which respects the animal itself, and living conditions that respect the animal's needs—this is the guarantee of quality” (interviewee 4). Another explains “it is about how the animals are raised, their welfare. . .in the sense that the animal did not have to suffer” (interviewee 1). Here, alterity is not articulated as opposition to the industrial, but as the enactment of care and respect in multispecies relations.

These statements illustrate how ethical difference becomes embodied and sensorial—how moral and ecological values are translated into the flavour and feel of food. Consumers describe ethics as something tasted and transmitted, not simply believed. The majority described detecting the flavour of this “freedom” in the meat they eat, and the importance of transmitting this to young children. For example, one consumer states: “You can taste

the difference [in the meat product]. And I transmitted this to my son, this awareness of the flavour of quality: he knew that what he ate at home was different to what he ate at the canteen" (interviewee 1). Another consumer quite aptly describes the interlinkages of animal and human health: "For me, just seeing the reality of the way in which animals are respected gives me confidence: to ensure my health and feel good I am interested in making sure the animal feels good too" (interviewee 3). In these exchanges, animal welfare, human health, and sensory experience are not separate domains but mutually constitutive.

Producers interviewed highlight with much detail and care the various phases of farm animals' lives, the respect for their natural habitats and behaviours, and the link this has to the quality of their product. One producer states succinctly: "The key point, in short, is that the animal's characteristics are respected in some way. They are not animals that are tied together all their lives. . . it is true that they are still destined to be eaten, so they follow a certain type of process. But during this period of their life they may live under conditions that come as close as possible to their characteristics and meet their needs: for sociality, movement, for being fed with green products or cereals, not with forced feeding, etc. All this affects the quality of the final product" (interviewee 10). Through such narratives, producers position their work as ethical labour grounded in respect and temporal attunement rather than efficiency or profit. The moral contrast with industrial production emerges not as rhetoric but as lived practice, defined by a rhythm of work that is, to varying degrees, attentive to the cycles, needs, and behaviours of other beings. Another producer describes the respect given to their animals in stark contrast to conventional industrial meat production: "If what you care about is profit, then at four months you bring a pig up to 80 kilos and have it slaughtered, then you've made it. But you didn't respect either the pig or what's around you. Because there is a whole force there with products that are so pressing, so fast, that in any case you destroy what's around you. You no longer respect nature which gives you the strength and elements to grow these animals. . . No additives to create red meat are necessary, you understand? It is mature meat. So our path is a natural path, respecting the animal that lives outside, respecting its growth times. But in the meantime she grows naturally, eating acorns, scratching at the ground with moss, growing stronger. That is, without antibiotics—thank God, we don't use anything."

Highlighting the interlinkage of health benefits also comes as inherent in the taste of the final product offered to their customers—a taste that is reminiscent of something past, and being lost. One producer highlights the link to tradition: "I have heard this sentence over and over again, it echoes inside of me: 'Here—in this meat—I feel the taste of when my grandmother made it for me'" (interviewee 8). Such recollections bridge ethical and affective registers, situating alterity also within nostalgia and intergenerational transmission. Another producer explains the relevancy of the interlinkages of health by listing the number of paediatricians and oncologists that contact him for their patients. Emphasizing the interlinkage between human health, animal health and nature, one producer states: "Because I, eating these things here, I live a kind of life. . . Nature means food products of this kind, but nature shows how to cure oneself, how to anticipate illnesses, how to deal with problems that may arise" (interviewee 7).

Explicit mention of sustainability and the environment was made only by two consumers whereas producers were much more keen to describe these links and to thoroughly describe the practices in their agricultural model that are regenerative: "So this is a model that keeps the organic substance of the soil in balance, the fertility of the soil, the possibility of making the correct rotations, because the forage is important to make the correct rotations, to keep the weeds under control, because then maybe I also make wheat" (interviewee 9). These accounts point to sustainability not as an abstract discourse but as a lived relational ethic, embedded in cycles of soil, plant, and animal life.

3.2. Perception of Alterity Within Producer–Consumer Relationships in an Ethical Meatscape

In Figure 1 the “alterity” of producer–consumer relations is reported within an ethical meatscape. A fundamental feature of the exchanges between consumers and producers in this ethical meatscape is the actual physical “being” in the space where the animals are—seeing, smelling, and experiencing the ensemble of activities happening on the farms. Interviewees shared significant consensus on one particular aspect of the producer–consumer relationship: the importance of consumers seeing and experiencing the reality of the production process face-to-face, as an embodied experience. Farm visits occupy a central place in the way they construct this relationship, as described by both consumers and producers. Such encounters transform all the choices around making, buying, and selling a product into an embodied and relational experience, where knowledge and trust are co-produced through sensory immersion. One producer explains: “In this way, people experience our reality and appreciate the product differently, also because they enter into the system of how this product is created, how it is born, how it grows, how you can taste it at the end. Because it’s one thing to take it packaged, it’s another thing to see how that product gets to that point” (interviewee 8).

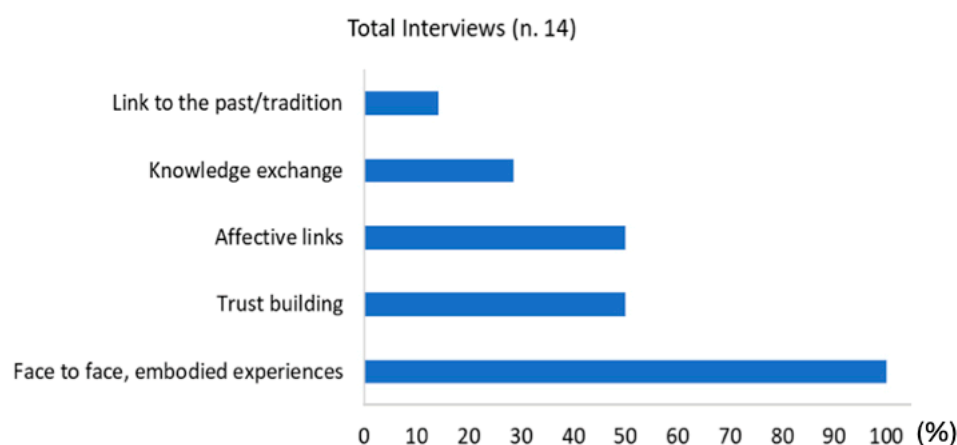


Figure 1. The ‘alterity’ of producer–consumer relations is reported within an ethical meatscape. Source: authors’ elaboration.

The visits made to the farms were consistently emphasized by interviewees as key turning points in developing levels of trust. One producer explains how this trust allows for a certain degree of understanding and flexibility later on in the relationship: “our secret is to create a relationship of trust with the consumer. The consumer must not have any doubts, they must experience first-hand what we do. We are doing these things; we bring these things to you with all our problems. You must understand that if we arrive at midnight it is not because we have been at the bar, but because we have worked until 11 pm [packaging the product so that it is fresh]” (interviewee 10). Here, ethical value is not guaranteed by labels or certifications but through co-presence—the witnessing that produces moral assurance. Furthermore, trust as described here is not merely a cognitive expectation but a form of moral responsibility: it requires transparency, vulnerability, and shared exposure to the contingencies of production. Echoing this emphasis on trust one consumer explains what this implies in the daily practice of eating: “The gain must go beyond the economic relationship. It means that he [producer] is entrusted in a way. . . I mean, the person [consumer] can trust the producer. . . And so if one day he doesn’t have what you want and gives you less, you know he gives it his all. This is essential, you don’t complain. . . because there’s this trust that is created beyond the final financial accounts, right? It’s not like you always have to do an economic evaluation of whether it’s worth it, no. . . there is another value that we decide as people, as human beings. That in my opinion

is the direct relationship with the producer” (interviewee 1). Such statements illustrate how alterity is enacted not only through what is consumed but through how relational value is prioritized over market logic. Be it organized tours of the farm through regular GAS events or individualised impromptu visits, these physical encounters hold a central role in ensuring the consumer is exposed to the various steps and challenges involved in animal food products: “You can immediately see what product it is, but making it fit into our reality and being part of our ideals” (interviewee 8).

Another consumer describes the effect that this type of relationship can have on the very practice of meat consumption: “What I ate I associated with that person’s face: for me, it was all about this. That is, the meaning of this relationship enters your daily life. . . that is, you know that he [specific producer] did it—that is, there is a person, there is not a machine, there is no system. . . That mystery, which you don’t really want to know about, is no longer there. . . So now there’s an emotional participation, it is an emotional experience. I got excited when I looked at the product” (interviewee 1). Face-to-face interactions, in these descriptions, dissolve the anonymity characteristic of industrial meat systems and embed affective recognition in the experience of alterity within this ethical meatscape.

Closely related to the dynamics of face-to-face encounters, all producers allude to their role in bridging and re-constituting people’s understanding of how ‘nature works’ by transmitting the realities of their lifestyle in relation to animals’ needs and behaviours, also navigating the ethical implications of meat consumption. One producer explains: “today the consumer is completely clueless, there is a fundamental ignorance. . . because people are far from the production processes” (interviewee 9). Consumers’ lack of exposure to natural rhythms of ethical meat production often translates into unrealistic demands; one producer explains: “you have a product at that moment and then a month goes by without having it. It’s very difficult. Why? Because people are used to going to the supermarket where they find that product from January 1st to December 31st. . . Even the people who believe in you and want everything for you, you are not always able to please. So you have to be patient enough to explain. . .” As such, temporal rhythms themselves become sites of alterity: slowness, scarcity, and seasonality are re-signified as ethical temporalities that resist the perpetual availability of industrial capitalism.

The exchange within this consumer–producer relationship includes producers understanding and adapting to the differing needs and desires of specific consumers—attention to detail in packaging the product according to the composition of family units, diversifying cuts to adapt to lifestyle changes (decreasing amount of time for food preparation), providing in-depth counselling on appropriate cooking methods that respect and draw out nutritional benefits of the meat. One producer explains how consumers have an “amazon mentality”, and so in a post-COVID context they have transitioned to door-to-door deliveries but continuously explain to consumers the time involved in guaranteeing them the quality of their product: “you have the production in the fields, then what you have to feed the animals, the whole system of animal breeding, and then the whole systematization of meat, distribution, processing. And from the processing there is the whole circle—people would like their fresh meat today; but they have to understand this is not possible” (interviewee 10).

While the direct producer–consumer relationship appears prominently and indisputably as the core feature of the alterity of the relational features of this ethical meatscape, interviewees differ immensely in terms of the extent to which they perceive the GAS as facilitating and scaling up this direct relationship. Consumer interviewees express appreciation of the GAS embodying a deeply alternative space that contrasts with mainstream consumption patterns: offering ample range of possibilities to support each other in transitioning towards more sustainable consumption patterns and for sustaining producers. Consumers

perceive the multiplying effect of their consumption choices as being quite important for producers: “I couldn’t do it alone, right? That is, having a group that supports you, that helps you. The GAS makes you experience this another way. It’s not just about doing the math. . . this is another matter” (interviewee 1). Other consumers emphasize the wide client base they provide, the publicity their group offers by word of mouth, and cite the examples whereby they make orders for non-GAS members widening producer’s access to markets.

Though there is variation amongst producers in terms of their client base and its link to the GAS, producers tend to value quality of engagement over scale. One notes: “when the GAS is made of good consumers that is better for us than big groups. . . good in the most sensitive sense: there is an ideological sharing of this choice of conscious consumption, where they look for safe things, adopt a relationship of trust with the producer—above all trust the producer” (interviewee 10). This contrast reveals an asymmetry in how alterity is valued: for consumers, it is reproduced through belonging to a collective; for producers, through deep personal recognition. One producer acknowledges the potential for the GAS to play a key role in developing and deepening this relationship, but emphasizes the essence of its relevancy being linked to the face-to-face dimension aforementioned: “The consumers in a GAS in theory should understand this [awareness of product process etc]. . . But what counts isn’t being in a GAS. You see who the people are who really want to feel and see the reality of what we do. . . But here’s the thing we try to make clear: come visit us, we are available. . . let them understand, talk to them, show your reality to them. That’s what we want people to do—come and understand. . . even if sometimes this means wasting a lot of time” (interviewee 8).

Another key factor of the potential of the GAS relates to the capacities, presence, and sensitivities of the key contact person in the GAS who collects orders and facilitates the regular communication with the producer to organize logistics of deliveries. The mediating role of GAS volunteers introduces both connection and distance—linking but also filtering relational intimacy. Interviewees highlight the internal mechanisms and dynamics of the GAS, whereby differences in values and priorities can present obstacles in establishing continuity of relationships between producers and consumers. Furthermore, with changes in social relations resulting from the COVID-19 epidemic, face-to-face encounters are reported as being severely jeopardized. All interviewees mention this as a shift and key turning point in social relations, whereby the habits and routine activities of the GAS have drastically changed with the uptake of online meetings and a decrease in organized visits to producers. There is a lack of interest and impetus to physically get together, be it on site or at the GAS meetings: “At the beginning, the producers all came to those meetings of ours, that is, they moved them, they came, they took us to taste things. . . COVID changed all of this” (interviewee 1). While there is consensus on the importance of face-to-face encounters for developing relations of trust in an ethical meatscape, there is divergence in perceptions of the GAS and its role in facilitating this. In contrast to consumers, who generally perceive an inherent added value to the model of a solidarity purchasing group, producers appear to have a more nuanced perception of the benefits and challenges that working with a GAS presents, associating these only in so much as it facilitates the elements of trust and ‘being known’ within direct relationships. This rupture underscores how fragile the material foundations of ethical relations can be: when proximity is suspended, the infrastructures of trust and recognition that sustain alterity are strained.

In sum, these exchanges reveal that alterity within this ethical meatscape is not an abstract moral stance but a situated practice co-constructed through sensory presence, negotiation, and care. Producers and consumers participate in a shared effort to attune human rhythms to those of animals, ecologies, and seasonal cycles, while also navigating the frictions that arise from differing temporalities, expectations, and capacities for under-

standing lifestyles. Ultimately, these relationships illustrate how ethics and alterity are enacted through ongoing negotiations of time, trust, and care. It is to these processes of co-production and their broader implications that we now turn in the discussion.

4. Discussion

Given its contextual specificity and attention on micro-social elements of relationality, this study highlights the centrality of practices of care in socio-nature entanglements within a specific Mediterranean ethical meatscape. Following Blumberg et al. [1], alterity is understood not as a fixed attribute that positions ethical meat networks as simply “alternative” to the industrial system, but as a relational and contested process through which actors perform and negotiate difference within capitalist foodscapes. This approach resists binary categorizations and instead examines how ethical commitments, spatial practices, and market relations co-produce what counts as “alternative” in specific contexts. Building on this understanding, this study offered an ethnographic-style snapshot of how producers and consumers enact and sustain such relational forms of alterity in practice. The findings confirm relational conceptions of space in geography—echoing Massey’s [34–36] influence on Blumberg et al. [1]—in showing that food spaces are not static backdrops but constituted through ongoing social and material relations. In this meatscape, space was found to be (1) relational: linking global and local pressures as small-scale producers struggle to remain viable amidst the expansion of large-scale, capital-intensive, and even “organic” industrial farms (2) multiple, composed of intersecting human and non-human trajectories—producers, consumers, animals, soils, and local ecologies—whose interactions shape understandings of quality, health, and ethical practice; and (3) processual, continually in the making, as trust and care are reconstituted through daily exchanges and precarious relations of production and consumption.

To situate our findings within a broader European context, a comparative study by Eldsouky et al. [37] explored how Spanish consumers weigh sustainability traits—animal welfare, environmental impact, production method, and local origin—highlighting a preference for domestically produced organic meat with animal welfare and eco labels. In contrast to this quantitative approach, our qualitative study examines how such attributes are weighed within the ethical imaginaries of producers and consumers, where animal welfare emerges as one of the most salient factors shaping their relations. Within this dynamic, rural subjectivities converged around the notion of ‘one health’, reflecting the interdependence of animal welfare, human well-being, and ecological health, and positioning producers as stewards with specific eco-social responsibilities within local agri-food systems. The decommodification of meat involved a gatekeeping role in which producers apply intimate knowledge of animals’ needs, behaviours, and ecologies, thereby shortening the distance between consumers and nature. Another comparative study is that of Baumann et al. (2023) [3] based in Canada, which focuses on relational dynamics within an ethical meatscape. They conclude that consumers loom large in the cultural imaginaries of meat producers, framing consumer choice as a foundational element of ethical production. In contrast, our analysis of this Italian ethical meatscape reveals a more nuanced relationship: producers focus on the quality and engagement of individual consumers, whereas consumers perceive the collective power of their GAS group as central to supporting and sustaining ethical production. Embodied, face-to-face encounters remain central to sustaining these relations: retaining direct engagement is essential to reveal the full ecological, social, and ethical dimensions of production and to support broader transitions towards sustainable agri-food systems. The temporal and affective labour of sustaining such relations foregrounds the ethical temporalities—of patience, attentiveness, and response to other species—which Blumberg et al. [1] identify as key sites of socio-ecological

transformation. These relations are continuously and partially constituted and reshaped in daily food practices: there is no certain ground in this exchange—trust is fragile and tenuous, highly contingent on ongoing day-to-day exchanges that build bridges between humans and nature.

At the same time, producers' narratives underscore the structural fragility of these economies. They voiced their struggles to compete with the expansion of large-scale industrial farms—particularly those embracing organic practices while still operating within a system driven by economies of scale and market consolidation. Our findings show that despite the variety of social values, relationships, and rationales of producers and consumers, the choices of consumers are perceived as being crucial for the very survival of these practices. As Arru et al. [38] note in their study of agritourism farms in less favoured areas, economic viability remains a fundamental condition for the continuity of such practices, even as farmers attach value to lifestyle and socio-emotional well-being. Through this lens, the moral and material economies of ethical meat cannot be disentangled: ethical commitments are continually reshaped by the systemic pressures—market consolidation, labour precarity, and ecological constraints—that both enable and limit them. By participating in these alternative circuits, producers and consumers rework commodity relations through closer social ties and affective attachments that move towards—though never fully achieve—the decommodification of food. These interactions reconfigure socio-ecological relations, offering glimpses of how ethical imaginaries and everyday practices can co-produce more just and sustainable food futures.

5. Conclusions

The ethical meatscape can be understood as holding a sort of a 'promise'—offering small-scale, sustainable and humanely produced meat that respects animals' natural life-course and is tastier and healthier to eat than industrial meat. In an era where global meat consumption is significantly on the rise, this promise is a highly charged and contested one. As such, ethical meatscapes represent a valuable site for analysing how socio-political and ethical values play out within food system transitions. Our findings show that rural subjectivities within an AFN exist within an imaginary that navigates the shifting nature of trust-building. The micro-social relations in these networks provide a window into daily practices of human–non-human interactions and ethical eco-social expressions, offering critical insights into how localized relational dynamics can contribute to broader sustainability transitions in agri-food systems. These findings extend relational approaches to food system transformation by showing how fragile trust, ethical temporalities, and situated knowledge sustain micro-level forms of socio-environmental justice—where well-being is shared across human and more-than-human lives. In this sense, transitions towards sustainability are revealed as relational achievements emerging from ongoing practices of care. At the same time, this study's small sample size and qualitative, single-site design limit the generalizability of its findings. Rather than offering representativeness, the research provides an ethnographic snapshot that captures the textures of interaction and meaning-making through which ethical and relational commitments are enacted. Future research could therefore benefit from comparative, multi-sited studies across Mediterranean and other agro-ecological contexts to examine how trust, care, and relational ethics are differently negotiated. Furthermore, integrating qualitative insights with complementary sustainability indicators could help bridge relational ethics with measurable sustainability outcomes, enriching dialogue between social and environmental dimensions of agri-food transitions. Finally, this study points to the need for further theorization of rural imaginaries—not as static or nostalgic constructs, but as evolving frameworks through which rural actors respond to ecological uncertainty and envision sustainable futures. Attending to how these

imaginaries are shaped, contested, and mobilized can help illuminate their role in enabling or constraining just and sustainable transitions within agri-food systems.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AFN	Alternative Food Network
GAS	Solidarity Purchasing Groups “Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale”
MC	Macerata
MD	Mediterranean Diet

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