

REKO

FAIR CONSUMPTION SINCE 2013





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The Story of REKO

REKO is an Ostrobothnian direct sales system that has taken the world by storm. When organic farmer Thomas Snellman from Pedersöre, Finland, introduced his idea of the direct sales of agricultural products, he was met with skepticism. Where would you find customers and how would such sales be organized?

REKO rings are nowadays a valued concept enabling producers to sell their products directly to consumers – without bureaucracy, middlemen, and lengthy transports. REKO was launched precisely at the right time and successfully responded to changing consumer behaviour and desire to purchase locally produced, clean food. There are currently over 600 REKO rings with more than 2 million members in 14 different countries, and the numbers keep climbing. Moreover, founder Thomas Snellman is a sought-after speaker in agricultural contexts.

IT IS NOW TIME to tell the story of REKO. How does the concept work, how did the first ring come about, what types of challenges have arisen along the way, and who are the customers? What is REKO today and what to do if you want to start a new ring? We will also tell the story of Thomas Snellman, an organic farmer from the village of Karby, Finland, who put Ostrobothnia on the world map.



WELCOME TO

Ostrobothnia

Ostrobothnia is a narrow coastal landscape on Finland's west coast. Here, along the coast, people have relied on agriculture and fishing throughout time.

OSTROBOTHNIA is a viable agricultural region with strong traditions in food production and processing. The region is known for its clean nature and local, healthy produce and food from forests, fields, and the sea.

The region's producers offer fantastic and genuine taste experiences. Local traditions mixed with Finnish culture and the proximity to Sweden result in an exciting combination. Ostrobothnia's maritime heritage is also strong. The growing season this far up north is relatively short but intensive. June and July experience daylight around

the clock, resulting in nutritious crops with concentrated flavours. During the winter months, fields are covered by snow, thus saving us from a wide range of parasites and diseases.

Ostrobothnia's northern part is home to the rural municipality of Pedersöre and its small village of Karby with circa 350 inhabitants (together with the neighbouring village of Sundby). This is where Thomas Snellman was born and raised, and this is where he nowadays runs an organic farm – only a stone's throw from his childhood homestead.



"**IN PEDERSÖRE** we have lived closed to nature for more than 670 years, and we have learned to appreciate clean and pure products. History has taught us the importance of a sustainable development in all our activities – ecologically, socially, culturally and economically. Our best assets are entrepreneurship and innovation capacity. REKO, a result of this way of thinking, shows us that a strong and sustainable vision can become a worldwide movement."

STEFAN SVENFORS
Chief Executive, Pedersöre



"**WE HAVE A STRONG** entrepreneurial spirit in Ostrobothnia and long traditions of handling things ourselves and helping others when needed. Ostrobothnia was one of the regions in Finland where organic farming quickest gained a foothold. We also have a strong interest in developing our local community. We're open to new ideas, and REKO is a good example of how a successful concept can spread from Ostrobothnia all over the world."

KAJ SUOMELA
Regional Mayor, Regional Council of Ostrobothnia





THE VERY FIRST

REKO-ring

It all began here in Jakobstad, Finland, one Thursday evening in June 2013. Organic farmer Thomas Snellman wanted to create a new system for selling food directly to consumers – a system that is both flexible and convenient.

FOOD SCANDALS have followed one another as food production has become increasingly industrialized. The news has reported everything from poisoned Chinese milk to the story of beef lasagna actually consisting of horsemeat. The Mad Cow Disease in the early 1990's – topped off with insufficient and incorrect labelling, false ingredients lists, and deceptive marketing – led to a great awakening in Europe. Who can we actually trust? Food is a necessity of life and should be a given. However, nowadays it is difficult to keep track of what we eat. How did it come to this, and how can we find our way back to natural, sustainable, and healthy food consumption?

For Thomas Snellman, organic farmer and founder of REKO, the journey began with a yearning for the opportunity to buy clean, locally produced food. Even in Finland, development has shifted towards an increasingly centralized market, with two large retail chains governing the supply – and therefore also what we eat. Thomas was concerned about the countryside's survival and about finding a system that benefits even smaller producers. Several Finnish farmers stopped their farming operations in the early 2010's due to poor profitability, and five farms were closed down per day during the most difficult period.

Thomas Snellman visited his good friend Jacques Meyer in the French countryside in October 2012. During the trip, they went to a local AMAP food market in the city of

Doué-la-Fontaine. AMAP (*Associations pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne*) is a joint network for consumers and producers. It can be described as a marketplace where products are pre-ordered and await payment and pick-up by the consumer. The producers generally convene once a week at a designated time and place. AMAP is based on a subscription system where the consumer undertakes to buy a certain product and amount for at least six months. In this way, the producer suffers no wastage.

Customers turned up gradually, people who came to collect the agricultural products they had pre-ordered. Most of the buyers Thomas met at the market were families with children, and milk was one of AMAP's bestsellers. One dairy farmer said that she sells 15,000 liters of milk per year via AMAP and, moreover, earns three times more than she would by selling milk the "normal way".

"I immediately realized the ingenuity of the idea and that it was something I needed to work on."

Back home in Finland, Thomas Snellman had long pondered how he could break the large retail chains' dominance and facilitate local shopping for consumers. Direct sales from producers to consumers had decreased significantly in recent decades, even though more and more consumers began asking for locally produced and organic food – without success. At his farm in Karby, Thomas sat down in front of his computer

2

million people all over the world are today members of a local REKO-ring.

STATISTICS FROM THE REKO RINGS

and began searching for information. How did it work in other countries, and were there similar systems to the French AMAP? Thomas only found some isolated projects, producer markets, and food cooperatives that had tested various types of sales channels, but none of these systems had gained any significant traction. The next step was to find out whether Finnish food legislation allowed direct food sales. Thomas was working as a project coordinator in the EkoNu project during this time and contacted his colleague, business adviser and food expert Jonas Harald at Dynamo Enterprise.

WHILE THOMAS SNELLMAN is the visionary and figurehead, Jonas Harald is the bureaucrat who possesses undisputed knowledge of food legislation. Jonas has worked as a health inspector and knows how to navigate the jungle between authorities. No matter how much he tossed and turned the idea, he couldn't find any obstacles to the concept, nothing that an authority could come and put an end to. Pursuant to Finnish legislation, private persons and small entrepreneurs are entitled to sell their own products, and each seller is responsible for paying their taxes and declaring their incomes. When dealing with various authorities, Snellman and Harald were often asked who was responsible for the activities. However, as all trade takes place directly between producers and consumers and every case is individual, there is no legislation limiting sales. REKO is consumer-driven, and it is not a trading venue but rather a meeting place where several individual trades take place.

Just like Thomas Snellman, Jonas Harald had also dreamt of a system that could challenge centrally governed retail and answer to consumer needs. Acting as business adviser, he had met with several producers who all wished to sell their products directly to customers, but so far there was no existing model for this. What's more, all attempts to date had been based on the producers' needs, of convincing the consumers that they need to buy certain products and shop locally to support local farmers. Traditional farmer's markets were also dying out. Against this background, Jonas realized the uniqueness and innovativeness of Thomas's model – REKO is all about the consumer, of what you as a buyer want, and what you're prepared to do for your products.

Thomas Snellman and Jonas Harald decided to launch their own direct sales system. The first planning meeting was held in January 2013, and interested consumers were invited to the meeting via an advertisement in the local newspaper. The meeting was a success, over 50 persons showed up. The first workgroup was established that same evening. The project was started as part of the EkoNu development project and in cooperation with Foodia Mathantverk, and the concept of REKO, fair consumption, was ready for launch in early 2013. Thomas and Jonas emulated the model of the French AMAP and created a system with written agreements and subscriptions where buyers and sellers agreed in advance on products, amounts, and delivery times. The product range provoked discussion, and careful thought was put into which

"REKO means everything to us. We run a CSA (community supported agriculture), and REKO enables us to deliver products to eight different cities. Sales are quick and efficient, and our little farm probably wouldn't have survived without REKO. This year, we've sold most of our products via the rings and the rest directly from our farm, and our revenue is looking to land at circa 500,000 euros."

TORE JARDAR SKJØNSHOLT WIRGENES
Farmer at Virgenes Andelsgård, Norway

products should be available and included in the weekly bag. Concrete proposals eventually took shape: the customer could order baskets in different sizes and price categories, and the contract period was fixed to two months. Payment took place once a month, in advance.

At first, sellers and buyers entered into written agreements; they agreed on amounts and prices and when and where the products could be collected, all based on the original French model.

A Facebook group was also established in order to discuss practical issues, and this eventually led to a development that laid the foundation for REKO's success. Consumers were eager to buy products without a subscription, and buying and selling soon moved over to Facebook. The group enabled producers to offer products that they currently had a large supply of. The name REKO was registered in the Finnish Patent and Registration Office to prevent others from using it for commercial purposes. REKO is unique because it is completely free of charge.

THE FIRST REKO RING was started in Jakobstad, Finland, and the first product pick-up was held on a parking lot right outside the city centre on Thursday June 6th, 2013. A handful of producers took part, selling potatoes, eggs, bread products, dill, coriander, lettuce, radishes, carrot bundles, yellow and red onion, strawberries, corn, Japanese cucumber, raspberries, beef, and homemade sausages. Still missing from the selection were, for instance, basic vegetables, fish,

"I immediately realized the ingenuity of the idea and that it was something I needed to work on."

THOMAS SNELLMAN

and honey, and the workgroup decided to contact more producers. Within a couple of weeks, ten more producers had shown interest in the concept, and the next product pick-up was significantly more versatile. The Jakobstad ring has since then functioned as a model and platform for REKO's continued development.

The second ring was started in the Ostrobothnian city of Vaasa four weeks later, and word spread quickly to other parts of the country. Soon rings popped up in the municipalities of Vesilahti and Kronoby and the cities of Kristinestad and Mariehamn, and especially the latter ring in the Åland Islands grew rapidly. Already by the following spring, an information event was held in Länsi-Uusimaa, Finland, in cooperation with the local food projects *Bra Mat i Västnyland* (Good Food in Western Uusimaa) and *Västankvarn – En Västnyländsk Matkälla* (Västankvarn – Western Uusimaa's

Food Source). The city of Hanko and the municipalities of Ingå and Raseborg were discussed as potential REKO pick-up sites. The first product pick-ups were held in the municipalities of Pohja and Ingå right before Easter 2014. Consumers were able to buy for instance honey, apple juice, cucumber, potatoes, bread, meat, and flour in Pohja. Producers also offered more exotic products, such as birch sap, both natural and flavoured with blackcurrants. Everything was pre-ordered in accordance with the concept. Slightly fewer producers took part in Västankvarn, although they, too, offered a wide selection of products and even farm milk. One of the customers described the event as a type of tailgate flea market.

A group of rural developers convened to a future seminar in the city of Kuortane in the autumn 2014 and invited Thomas Snellman to talk about the new concept:

"It was the seminar's first evening and the whole auditorium was filled with chatter. I was a bit nervous, both because of my imperfect Finnish and because I didn't know how to get the audience's attention. A REKO pick-up was taking place in Vaasa during the same evening. I spoke for a while and then logged in to REKO Vaasa's Facebook group and showed the audience an example of an egg seller and his orders. When the audience saw the number of comments and orders, the whole room became quiet. I toured the cities of Kankaanpää, Pori, Rauma, and Huittinen later in the autumn, and new rings were started in these cities already during the same evening. When we arranged an information event in the Council Hall of Huittinen, an older man stood up and said that this was the first time that Facebook was actually used for something beneficial."

ALL OF A SUDDEN, a simple, accessible, and immensely non-bureaucratic and self-propelled system for the direct sales of local food was born. REKO is more flexible than for instance cooperatives and food markets. The system is based on voluntariness

"REKO is all about the consumer, of what you as a buyer want, and what you're prepared to do for your products."

JONAS HARALD

and trust. The administrators or admins of individual rings lay down guidelines determining who can participate and what can be sold.

What's more, REKO was launched precisely at the right time. As demand for local food increased, the food self-sufficiency trend also grew, and cooking programs were blasted on all TV channels. In a flash, it became trendy to stand in the kitchen and prepare your own food from clean ingredients. There was also a lot of talk about reducing foodstuff additives, and more and more people started their own home gardens. It didn't take long for the concept to spread beyond Finland's borders. Sweden was the first stop, and the country's first REKO ring was started in the municipality of Grästorp in September 2016. The next country to join was Iceland, where REKO's launch was particularly successful due to a natural explanation – Icelandic producers lacked a functioning sales channel, but REKO quickly afforded them the necessary opening.

Thomas Snellman was invited to talk about the Finnish REKO model at an international seminar in Helsinki's multipurpose space Teurastamo in January 2014. Immediately after his speech, he was asked to attend a direct sales seminar in Paris, France, arranged by an organization called Urgenci,



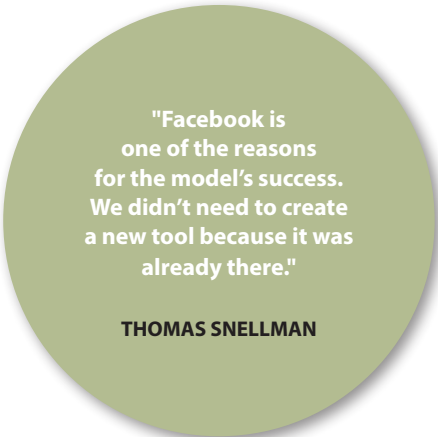


which had been tasked with developing a system for direct sales within the EU. The seminar's purpose was to bring forward good examples of direct sales in different countries in order to spread knowledge and ideas. The seminar was held on the La Bergerie de Villarceaux estate outside Paris and attracted participants from 16 countries. For three days, the participants discussed various direct sales models, and Thomas participated in a workshop on the utilization of social media in direct sales. The workshop was a success and garnered tremendous attention. This took place at the same time as actors in several countries were starting up various forms of direct sales models, partly as a result of Urgenci's first international meeting in Milan, Italy, in 2012. On the same day that Thomas returned home from France, he received an invitation to Belgium and later that year to Freiburg in Southern Germany.

REKO HAS BENEFITED greatly from media attention. Thomas Snellman estimated that he gave 100 newspaper interviews in 2015 alone. The fact that REKO gained such a huge impact and quickly spread to other countries can also be explained by the model's simplicity. All that are needed to start a REKO ring are some interested producers and a Facebook group.

Thanks to social media, communicating and managing sales suddenly became very simple.

"Facebook is one of the reasons for the model's success. We didn't need to create a new tool because it was already there. All that is needed is a group of interested producers and consumers. Our system also has a major advantage compared to the French AMAP: while subscriptions certainly provide security for the producer, they simultaneously put pressure on the security of supply. I've talked with French producers who've told that AMAP causes stress because you're expected to deliver, regardless of weather and harvest. With REKO, producers themselves decide when to



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THOMAS SNELLMAN

participate and which products to sell just that week."

A successful launch requires one or more interested key persons, but it is also about structures. While REKO rings have flourished in both Sweden and Norway, the system has failed to gain a strong foothold in Denmark despite numerous attempts. In this case, Thomas Snellman believes that it is due to agricultural development. Denmark currently has mainly large farms and producers that have no need for alternative systems. At the same time, Thomas is surprised that REKO has established itself in Italy. Surely the Italians don't need a new system with their marketplaces and plazas?

In 2016, Thomas was invited to an EU seminar on innovative data systems within the agricultural sector. Different systems were under development all over Europe, most of them run by IT companies with commercial interests. Thomas says that he felt like the odd one out in such a context, and when he talked about how REKO operates without any commissions and that he himself does not make any money on the system, many dismissed his idea. At the same time, other participants barely dared to present their ideas in fear of their competitors stealing them.

Nonetheless, REKO ended up being the only concept that received acknow-

Number of Rings Grows Rapidly



JAKOBSTAD

2013: 7 producers and 30 members.
2014: 1,200 members.
2015: 55 producers and 4,000 members.



FINLAND

| YEAR | RINGS | PRODUCERS | MEMBERS | REVENUE € |
|------|-------|-----------|---------|------------|
| 2013 | 2 | 15 | 400 | 80,000 |
| 2014 | 27 | 750 | 12,000 | 2 million |
| 2015 | 100 | 2,500 | 120,000 | 8 million |
| 2016 | 150 | 3,700 | 250,000 | 30 million |
| 2019 | 160 | 3,500 | 300,000 | 25 million |
| 2020 | 200 | 3,700 | 350,000 | 30 million |
| 2021 | 210 | 4,000 | 435,000 | 35 million |



WORLDWIDE

2019: 300 rings and 650,000 members in 6 countries.
2021: 600 rings and 2 million members in 14 countries.

80

**percent of members in REKO Jakobstad's Facebook group
 – or 5,000 persons out of a total of 6,500 members –
 check out the producers' supply each month.**

• The data is based on statistics from REKO rings and Thomas Snellman's own estimates.

PHOTO: ANNA SNELLMAN



The very first REKO sales. Hanna Palovuori buys bread from Anette Bergvall-Fagerström.

ledgement in the European Commission's newsletter.

There are nowadays over 100 research reports all over the world mentioning the name Thomas Snellman, and Thomas's 2017 TEDx Talk in Reggio Emilia, Italy, continues to receive new views every month. Thomas has unwittingly and perhaps slightly begrudgingly created a platform for himself and become the face of the global REKO movement. He has spoken to politicians, governments, the EU, and been invited to places he never could have dreamt about. REKO has also functioned as a catalyst for new projects; producers have found each other in a completely innovative way, and new collaborations and business ventures around home deliveries and direct sales continue to emerge. Thomas is glad that his system contributes to a vibrant countryside and stronger confidence in the future amongst producers.

"And we also have one other advantage – no one can either govern or buy REKO. The big question is why the same system hasn't arisen

somewhere else in the world. The answer probably is because it's so simple but at the same time genius."

REKO has also fulfilled one of Thomas Snellman's own goals – to create a functioning sales channel for local producers. The system has become an important source of income for producers. Statistics from the city of Jakobstad show that the ring's annual revenue is around 300,000 euros, divided amongst circa 50 producers. In other words, producers that participate in several rings can reach significant sales figures per year. Even smaller producers report that they sell products worth several hundred euros per week, which amounts to large sums on an annual basis.

Thanks to REKO, producers have also gained a better negotiating position in relation to trade. REKO allows producers to test new products and receive immediate feedback from customers – a simple way to find out which products are good and have a market. ●

Why Do You Shop at REKO?

The replies have been picked from Ekovera's 2020 survey.
www.ekovera.se

"I want goods that are produced without toxins, child labour, and a large environmental impact."

"I want to support small businesses that are environmentally conscious and offer good products."

"My participation is a requirement for continued sales."

"It feels morally good to buy local produce directly from the producers."

"I want to support the producers, but it's too time-consuming to travel from farm to farm."

"REKO is an eco- and climate-friendly concept, the quality of products is better, and there are no middlemen."

DIRECT SALES SYSTEM REKO

How It Works

Locally produced, fresh food directly from producer to consumer – without middlemen. REKO is a Finnish model for direct sales, operating as a pre-order system.

THE CONCEPT is simple: the purpose is to provide consumers with fresh local ingredients, without middlemen.

A REKO ring operates on a closed Facebook group. Producers and consumers who wish to participate in a REKO ring can apply to join the desired group. The admins, who are often a small group of key persons, accept the membership application, whereafter the member can begin buying or selling. A producer writes a Facebook post about his or her product and supply, and consumers order the goods by commenting

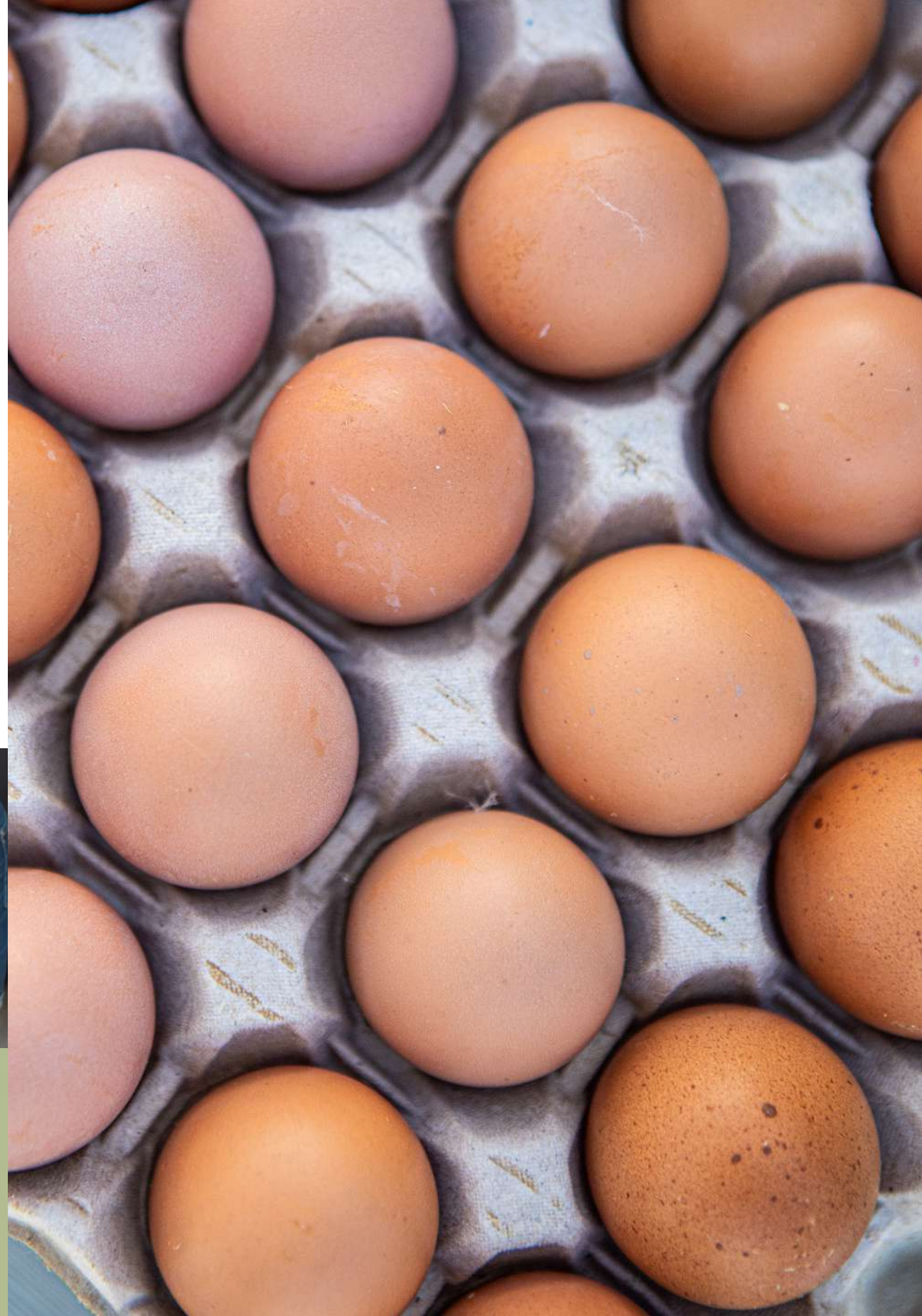
directly below the post. The producer also states his or her preferred means of payment.

The producer then delivers the pre-ordered products to the meeting place at the designated time for pick-up – a cost- and time-efficient model for both parties. Product pick-up usually takes place weekly or biweekly, depending on the size of the group. It lasts about an hour. All producers convene to the same place so that consumers can collect their orders from several producers at the same time.



Common Ground Rules

- 1. No middlemen.** Producers must sell their own products themselves.
- 2. The system is free of charge** for both producers and consumers, only the products have a price.
- 3. Producers themselves are responsible** for ensuring that everything is right and legal (for instance, they need to pay taxes and adhere to food laws).





Do You Want to Start a Ring?

You need:

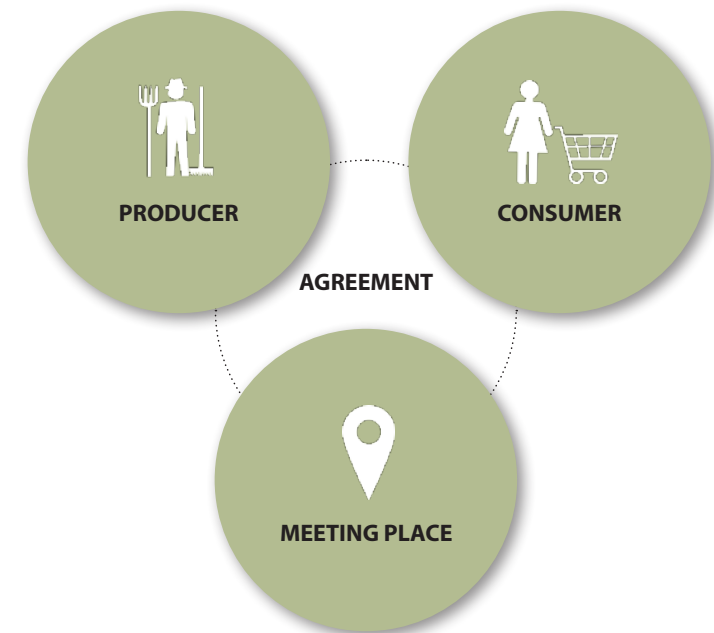
- Some interested **consumers** to form the basis for a local ring.
- Local **producers** of the most important products.
- A **meeting place** that is easily accessible to both consumers and producers.

How to get started:

- Create a Facebook group and invite producers and consumers to join.
- Decide a place, weekday, and time for product pick-up.
- Decide how to communicate within the group.

Remember:

- Follow the ground rules. REKO is based on mutual trust that is maintained through good, factual information and good interactions.



The word REKO

stands for fair consumption. The word **rekoring** was added to the annual list of new words compiled by the Swedish Institute of Language and Folklore in 2017.

Why Sell at REKO?

Benefits for producers:

You get to sell your produce directly to consumers.

Who is it for?

- You already sell your products on the local market.
- You have organic production and want to find consumers who appreciate your products.
- You cultivate various crops and like to try out new varieties.
- You have minor production, perhaps as a secondary source of income or as a hobby.
- You're interested in starting production or activities and want to try it out.
- You're a beekeeper, keep laying hens, a fisherman, or have other products and a desire to sell locally.
- You're a small-scale food business operator with special, sought-after products that are not suited to major retail chains.
- You're passionate about baking or other craft food, and you have the opportunity to produce for others outside your own family.



Why Shop at REKO?

Benefits for consumers:

You can buy locally produced food directly from producers.

Who is it for?

- You want to buy fresh and delicious food at an affordable price.
- You want to know what you're eating.
- You want to buy local organic products with a known origin.
- You're interested in food and curious and want to try new products and purchase channels.

Economic benefits

- Fresh food at a lower price.
- You don't pay for unnecessary advertising and middlemen.
- No costs for unnecessary packaging or transport.
- You support the local economy and your own community.

Create new contacts

- You get the opportunity to meet the person who produces your food, and you may even get a chance to visit the farm, if so agreed.
- You can meet like-minded consumers with similar values and interests.
- You can share experiences and recipes, perhaps even exchange products.
- Meeting others halfway fosters trust and community spirit.

Good for the environment!

- We're encouraged to eat seasonal food and become closer to nature.
- We avoid unnecessary packaging and transport.
- Buy clean products – not anonymous commodities – from a producer.
- We utilize all products. A crooked carrot is as good as a straight one!

Perfect for all food-lovers

- Fresh produce harvested at their peak.
- Exciting, unusual varieties not found in supermarkets.
- Animals are reared with natural feed.
- Craft food prepared with love and no unnecessary additives.
- Fish caught the same day if the catch has been good.



For Love of Food

Thomas Snellman says that he has been lucky. Life has taken him to all kinds of interesting places, and he has had the privilege to get to know people all over the world.

THOMAS SNELLMAN grew up on a farm, the second youngest of nine siblings. When he was two, his father became seriously ill, and his mother and older siblings had to shoulder much of the responsibility for the farm. The family had dairy cows, and Thomas, too, had to pitch in at an early age. He liked animals and gradually became responsible for milking the cows. He never felt like it was an obligation; instead, it was natural for him to help out.

Thomas liked school, or rather, he liked learning new things. After he graduated, he had his sights set on further studies after military service. However, his military service allowed him time to think on his future, and he decided instead to take over his parents' farm. He was used to wandering in forests and fields and making his own decisions, and spending time trapped in a room with books and lengthy studies did not appeal to him.

Thomas officially became a farmer on April 4th, 1981. The Finnish agricultural sector was experiencing a large wave of optimism in the early 1980's, and Thomas had big plans. He began with his family's eight dairy cows and some calves. Land parcelling was simultaneously taking place in Thomas's home village, and he chose to move to a more suitable plot a short way from his homestead. He built a house and barn, married, and had four children while participating in various producer organizations. Thomas read a newspaper article in 1990

about newly established support for the transition to organic farming. He immediately related to the concept of organic farming and realized that it was completely in line with his own values. As a result, he signed up and switched to organic farming already during the same year. There was not a lot of information to be had, but he researched as much as he could. The first years were good – both economically and plant-wise.

"When I was young, almost every family in the countryside and many in the cities had their own vegetable patch to cover at least part of the family's food needs. This changed completely in only a couple of decades. Large-scale operations and productivity began providing affordable food to all consumers. People started travelling to distant countries and sampling different taste experiences, and large stores saw profit opportunities in offering exotic products to consumers year-round. Food had become a global commodity that was transported to consumers who could afford to pay for it. In such a fossil-doped system, the environment and third world countries pay the ultimate price. Our own farmers also suffer. In order to survive the competition, many invested in large-scale but narrow production. Nevertheless, they could not compete with countries that had a more favourable climate, lower wage costs and, in some cases, ruthless exploitation of finite resources. Concerned consumers and producers saw how our increasingly narrow agriculture



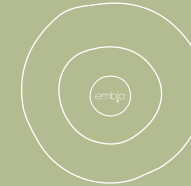


Thomas Snellman

Organic farmer, rural developer and founder of REKO in Finland 1990–2012
Driving force and source of inspiration for organic farming in Finland 1990–2012
Certified organic reviewer 2001–2015
Part-time project coordinator at EkoNu 2012–2018

Award-Winning Man and Concept

2018: Rural Person of the Year, Finnish Village Movement Association
2017: Nordic Food Entrepreneur of the Year, EMBLA (see photo below)
2015: Local Food Achievement of the Year, The Finnish Fair Foundation
2014: Foodia Awards



affected watercourses, biodiversity, and life in the countryside.

As a result of this, I reorganized my own farming activities into organic production. However, finding channels for organic produce was difficult at that time. Shopping habits had changed, and getting products into our major retail chains' selections at a reasonable price was more or less impossible for a small producer. The same applied to village shops, and farmer's markets all over Finland were dying out. Conscious consumers created food rings where they could buy organic and locally produced food. But this was always small-scale and difficult to coordinate. This trend that took place in Finland also happened in many other European countries."

IN RETROSPECT, Thomas Snellman says that the transition to organic farming was the best decision of his life. He quickly created a platform for himself as an organic farmer and was not afraid to stick his neck out and engage in debates. He chose to go his own way and invest in what he believed.

Nevertheless, everyday life with his family, farming, and several positions of trust was tough, and Thomas was eventually forced to reconsider his choices and take a break. The realization that his children needed him here and now was decisive, in combination with a catastrophically rainy summer that destroyed large parts of the crop. Dairy cows were replaced by suckler cows, and suddenly Thomas found time to get involved in his children's hobbies. After a long and difficult time in life, he needed time to unwind. At the same time, he wan-

ted something else to occupy his thoughts and signed up for a beginner's course in French. He had met a couple of French wine producers at an agricultural fair and lamented the fact that he was unable to communicate with them. He took a couple of courses but gradually realized that it was not the right way for him to learn the language. Thomas contacted the Ostrobothnian office of Carrefour and asked them to try to find a French farmer who was interested in a trainee from Finland. He wrote a letter about his dream – to learn French – and offered to come work for free in exchange for board and lodging. A sheep farmer north of Lyon seized the offer, and Thomas travelled to France for two months in the autumn 2001.

"Looking back, one might wonder if it was a smart thing to do. I left my wife at home to look after the children and farm. It wasn't easy, and it wouldn't have been possible without her. But I'm glad I had the courage to do it. Those months in France have opened unbelievably many doors."

Snellman became involved in a European project on voluntary organizations at a university in Saint-Étienne and was invited even to other events. He has helped French students who have come to Finland and created a large contact network within the French rural industry.

Thomas continues to run his farm with beef cattle, and now there are many other things that take up his time – not least all his REKO-related tasks. He has worked as a rural developer, an ombudsman to local farmers, Chairman of an Organic Review Bo-

PHOTO: EMBLA



ard, and organic reviewer with the Finnish Food Authority. Moreover, he has stood as a candidate in municipal elections and European Parliament elections. Thomas has promoted locally produced food in various contexts and also taken part in theme weeks focusing on school lunches prepared from organic ingredients in the municipalities of Pedersöre and Vörå and the cities of Jakobstad and Nykarleby.

"The feedback was positive, but the kitchen staff brought up problems with raw material acquisition and procurement rules. I largely handled raw material acquisitions by myself during the theme weeks and managed to some extent. We showed that it was possible. This means that locally produced ingredients

are a possibility with the right attitude. Food lunches also serve as a stance on climate and environmental issues – and locally produced and preferably organic food is an excellent stance."

All these tasks have given Snellman a significant contact network and credibility in producer circles – a valuable foundation in REKO work. Nonetheless, he emphasizes that REKO is not a one-man show. While it was his idea, its implementation is a result of cooperation and voluntary efforts. The concept has succeeded and become widespread thanks to committed admins, sellers, and customers who turn up every week. ●

"I've received many awards for which I'm grateful, but the best feedback has come from rural producers. They've contacted me and said that they didn't have a future before REKO – but now they do. If REKO helps even just one producer continue their operations, my work has meaning."

THOMAS SNELLMAN
Founder of REKO





Positions of Trust

2021: Finland's representative in the Board of Directors of the "Agrobridges" EU project

2020: Finland's representative in the EIP-AGRI focus group "Wildlife and Agricultural Production"

2018: Keynote speaker at the 12th IFOAM European Organic Congress in Vienna, Austria

2018: Member of the workgroup that formulated the Green League's agricultural policy programme

2017: Speaker at a TEDx conference in Reggio Emilia, Italy

2017: Expert lecturer at the EU seminar "Agrifood SMEs Collaborating for Innovation Along the Supply Chain – What, Who, How?" in Brussels, Belgium

2016: Participant in the EIP-AGRI seminar "Data Revolution" in Sofia, Bulgaria

2014–2015: Member of the workgroup "Training in Alternative Food Distribution Systems"

1997: Initiator of SLC's workgroup on genetic engineering in agriculture

1996–2002: Member of MTK's Organic Committee

1991: Initiator of ÖSP's Organic Committee and its Chairperson of 12 years

1981–2003: Board member of Pedersöre ÖSP

"REKO is a true grassroots movement that is alive and well thanks to its members in Ostrobothnia, Finland, and all over the world. Its success would not have been possible without you."

THOMAS SNELLMAN

RESEARCH

REKO Attracts Women

The typical REKO customer is a 30-year-old woman with a family and stable income. Research also shows that REKO rings function every bit as well in cities as in the countryside.

STATISTICS show that REKO and other types of food rings are a factor to be reckoned with in the food industry: 458,000 persons claim to have bought food via a food ring, and 190,000 Finns have shopped via REKO at some point.

REKO has been the subject of numerous research reports and theses over the years. The concept was described in an American Master's Thesis already in 2015, also containing an interview of Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes – Vaasa-based Doctor of Economics, researcher, and the person responsible for establishing REKO in academic circles. Ehrnström-Fuentes has studied the concept's sustainability promise and ethical principles and published two scientific articles about REKO.

How Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes gained a central role in the development of REKO was due to a series of circumstances. She and her family had recently moved to Vaasa from Helsinki when she saw an advertisement in a local newspaper for a meeting to start a new food ring. This was precisely what she as a newcomer and food-lover was looking for. She attended the first meeting and became one of the driving forces behind Vaasa's REKO ring.

Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes has a background in the forest industry. She worked

for a time as a sales assistant for a large Finnish forestry company in South America, where she lived for many years. During these years, several environmental conflicts arose with the local population living close to the cellulose factories, making her reflect on how global economy affects local life in a way that is not always positive. She thought much about how the industry could create better relations with local communities and began to believe that we can – and should – live differently. A couple of years later, when Ehrnström-Fuentes was faced with the choice to continue working for the forest industry or seek a new path, she began instead to research corporate social responsibility issues. It was partly about the family's puzzle of life but, above all, also an ethical issue. Ehrnström-Fuentes says that she no longer wants to be part of a movement that creates conflicts with small farmers and local communities in places where large eucalyptus plantations and cellulose factories replace local food production.

"I was shocked, to say the least, when I realized what happens when the forest industry establishes itself in a local community. For instance in Uruguay, one million hectares of the land's total surface of 17 million hectares is currently covered by eucalyptus plantations





"Most alternative food networks are not so radical that they'd want to mass mobilize and completely overturn the global food system. Instead, they want to rekindle the complex network of social, ecological, and political connections that broke apart with the emergence of the global food system."

HEIDI BARMAN-GEUST

Från jord till bord, utan mellanhänder

and the number keeps on growing. I've been interested in locally produced food for some time, and I realized then that I could no longer be part of all this – that I have to do everything I can so that this doesn't happen to us."

Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes began her doctoral studies. The subject of her research was the forest industry's impact on local communities and corporate responsibility in Chile and Uruguay. She was simultaneously involved in the development of Vaasa's REKO ring. The first advertisement came on a silver platter. Ehrnström-Fuentes says that she didn't know anything about agriculture or food production, but she learned quickly and connected with producers and like-minded consumers. And just like in other cities, the ring in Vaasa grew rapidly from around thirty consumers to one thousand, and product deliveries filled Kasarmintori, an old barracks where the pick-ups took place. Vaasa's REKO ring has nowadays around 14,000 members.

After Ehrnström-Fuentes completed her PhD, she continued researching and turned her attention to REKO. Her research has focused on e.g. the sustainability promise and the creation of ethical principles in a self-organized system such as REKO. One of the biggest debates during REKO's first years focused on eggs and to what extent large egg producers should be allowed to sell via the concept. This debate was most heated in the Turku region, which is home to large parts of Finland's egg production and where many of the local producers are major players.

"The question of how to define sustain-

ability also became a stumbling block for me. How can one measure what is more or less sustainable? There are several meters, but none of them so exact as to differentiate between which two egg producers have more sustainable production: the hobby producer who drives his eggs x kilometers every week, or the large-scale farmer who delivers vast amounts of eggs with central distribution chains? This egg discussion also led to the realization that REKO is not necessarily about organic production as much as it's about the importance of the food's local aspect."

Another issue that Ehrnström-Fuentes has studied more closely is the concept of self-organization and what happens when a group of committed inhabitants join forces to create a local distribution system for locally produced food. Her research focused on REKO, the complex social processes that arise when people with differing interests and motives get involved and interact, and what happens when the operations grow. A conflict arose within REKO in the summer 2016 when a smaller group of admins proposed that all REKO rings should have the same rules and principles regarding who are allowed to sell their products. Facebook discussions became heated, and the whole conflict ended in the formation of new groups that distanced themselves from the guidelines.

Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes burns for issues relating to organization, local communities, and sustainable food production and systems. She is fascinated by how it is all connected and to what extent we can actually influence things when we organize

ourselves locally around a specific issue.

"REKO has always benefited from crises. One good example is the #savethecauliflower campaign. In July 2017, Finnish vegetable producers had large stocks of domestic cauliflower that nobody wanted to buy. The season was problematic due to late harvests, which prompted retail chains to import large amounts of foreign cauliflower during the summer. When domestic cauliflower was ready to be harvested, the wholesalers' purchase prices were so low that harvesting was not worthwhile. Producers were faced with a big dilemma – what to do with all the cauliflower? The Vasabladet newspaper interviewed a worried cauliflower producer who explained the situation, which led to a national discussion with cauliflower in the main role. I immediately saw the opportunity to activate our local REKO ring and contacted the producer. It was not just about marketing, but also about not letting a prime raw material go to waste. I wrote a post about cauliflower in our Facebook group, and the queue to buy it was record-long already the following morning. We sold two tons of cauliflower in Vaasa in two weeks. Major supermarket chains were inspired by our hashtag and launched their own advertisement campaigns, and suddenly we had created a national social movement of consumers who wanted to make use of cauliflower. Producers are used to vegetable purchase prices being dumped, but this was an eye-opener for many consumers. Part of the domestic food that is produced goes to waste due to low purchase prices and low demand. The cauliflower example shows that there is a possibility to impact trade, that

"The cauliflower example shows that there is a possibility to impact trade, that grassroots movements have power. It gives me hope in the future."

**MARIA
EHRNSTRÖM-FUENTES**

grassroots movements have power. It gives me hope in the future."

Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes talks of creating change, of finding systems that can truly challenge problems caused by lengthy logistics chains and the global food industry. She is convinced that the answer is in how we organize ourselves – *"if only there were more people who thought like Thomas Snellman, change would happen faster"*.

THE INTEREST IS THERE; half a million Finns state that they have bought food via alternative distribution channels. But in order to understand what it is about, we must first understand and find our own place on earth. Ehrnström-Fuentes herself is a loyal REKO customer, and she has now also begun to cultivate her own vegetables. Her greenhouse is filled with tomato plants, and the family's three freezers are packed with spinach, broccoli, beans, and pumpkin

80

percent of food-retail in Finland took place at S Group (45,9%) and K Group (35,8%) in 2017. The third-largest chain was Lidl Finland (9,3%).

FINNISH GROCERY TRADE ASSOCIATION, 2018

564

euros per year. That's how much the average REKO consumer spends. Most consumers state that they shop via REKO around once a month.

FRÅN JORD TILL BORD, UTAN MELLANHÄNDER

to last the whole winter. She is aware that research is a slow way to impact things, but she hopes to reach people via her articles, blogs, and podcasts. She does her best to provide a voice to marginalized forces with the help of her national and international research networks. Blogs and podcasts also function as her sounding board in research activities. Her blog and podcast Worlds in Transition discuss the transition towards more sustainable forms of living, a trend all over the Swedish-speaking Finland. They focus on people who have transformed their lives, people who not only dream but also occasionally act:

"People who sow the seeds to new worlds, worlds that are just waiting to see the light of day if we only give them a chance. These stories are often sidelined because they appear so unrealistic and marginal compared to the reality in which many live. They are not about chasing fame or showing off flashy technological innovations. They are about both the inner and outer transformation of people's lives so that they live more in harmony with themselves, their surroundings, and the nature that forms the foundation for the conditions of life on this planet. ... By suggesting that there are several worlds (what we in technical jargon call living in a pluriverse instead of a universe), I want to open up new lines of thinking and new fields of vision. The collection of podcasts shows that there is not only one world. Through our own choices and relations to our surroundings, we have a chance to influence the type of world we want to live in now and in the future."

Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes is currently a

postdoctoral researcher at Hanken School of Economics in Vaasa, and her present research project focuses on local self-organization and grassroots innovations or, in other words, how alternative economic systems can be created through grassroots innovations such as REKO. She also talks about horizontal networks, the possibility to quickly spread information to large crowds via social media, and how to benefit from this interaction. The cauliflower campaign was one example, another is the so-called Strömsö sweater, which inspired Finns to take up knitting after seeing the sweater on TV. The sweater's pattern has already been downloaded over 700,000 times.

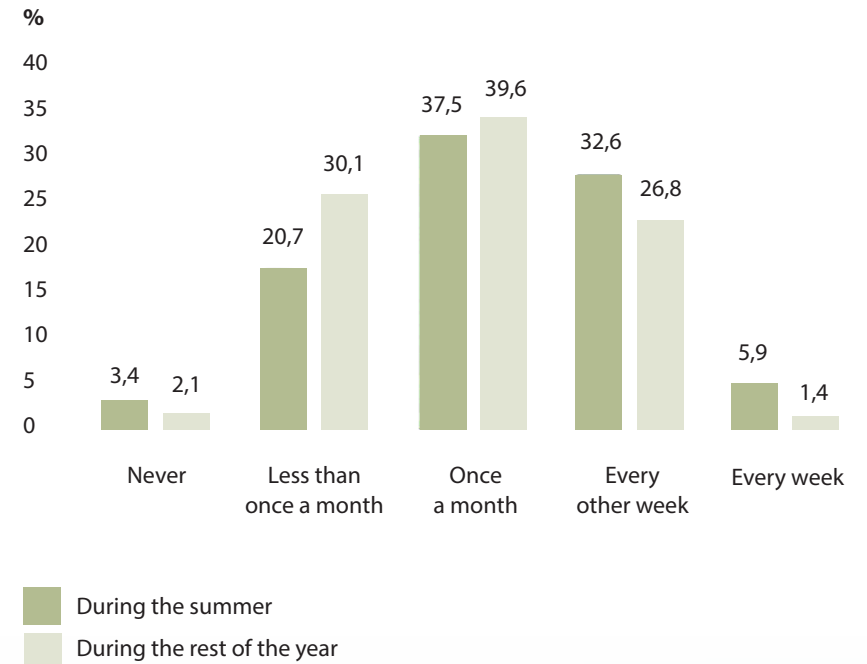
Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes believes in REKO and is convinced of the concept's bright future.

"But you need to find something with a long-term foundation in order to create a sustainable system, a system in which producers can trust to receive their daily income. For many farmers, REKO is currently more of a complementary income alongside supermarket deliveries. REKO is also logistically difficult and time-consuming, especially for slightly larger producers."

ALL STUDIES that have been conducted on REKO show that the majority of REKO consumers are middle-aged women who favour the concept because they want food that maintains a high quality, they want to support local producers, and they want to know about the food's origin.

Heidi Barman-Geust conducted an empirical study in 2019 on REKO consumers

How Often Do You Shop Via REKO?



Source: Från jord till bord, utan mellanhänder



within the framework of her Master's Thesis at Åbo Akademi's Faculty of Social Sciences, Business and Economics. Her purpose was to describe the great interest in REKO in Finland as well as to investigate who the consumers are and what motivates them to buy their food via REKO. The investigation was carried out in the form of a survey in January–February 2018, and the target group consisted of consumers from the 177 REKO rings that existed in Finland at that time. 1,601 persons answered the survey.

The results show that the majority of REKO consumers are middle-aged women living in a relationship. They possess intermediate education, are actively employed, and have a good financial situation. They shop at REKO because they view that it is important that food tastes good, maintains its high quality, and has a known origin. For them, locally produced food is also more important than organically produced food. Food prices are least relevant. Another motivating factor is the will to support the local community's food producers and processors. In addition, consumers want to buy food that meets their taste and quality requirements, and they want information on how, where, and by whom the food was produced or processed.

The results correspond well with other similar research. A survey was sent to REKO rings in the cities of Jakobstad, Nykarleby, and Vaasa in 2016. In these rings, 87% of the consumers were women and 13% men, most between the ages of 25 and 35. Good taste and high quality were reported as the most important reasons to shop via the rings, but also the food's domesticity, local production, and healthiness were highly regarded. In contrast, food prices had no great significance. A survey was conducted in 2016 in the Järvilakeus REKO ring in Southern Ostrobothnia in order to discover whether the consumers' demand and the availability of produce met one another. In Järvilakeus, consumers stated that the high quality of produce was the foremost reason

"Cherish
and protect REKO.
It's the finest popular
initiative in years."

www.ekovera.nu

to shop via a REKO ring. Supporting local producers and gaining information about the product's origin came in second place. Many consumers also stated that they appreciate the organic nature of the food, the openness around its production, and the low price. Women constituted the majority (93%) also in this case, while the average age of all consumers was between 30 and 39.

Johan Grotell-Esteves has researched factors that motivate consumers to shop via Finnish REKO rings in Olari (Espoo), Leppävaara (Espoo), and Munkkiniemi (Helsinki). He concluded that the majority prefer REKO rings due to social, economic, environmental, practical, and quality reasons. In addition to positive aspects, REKO was also described as a social occasion with the chance to talk with the producers, support local producers and domestic food production, and the opportunity to get hold of high-quality produce that is difficult to find in supermarkets. Negative aspects included the facts that not everybody could afford shopping via REKO and that some considered the concept impractical, with difficulties related to ordering and limited supply.

In her research, Heidi Barman-Geust takes up one of the fastest growing trends – interest in locally produced food. She states that food is a sensitive subject that affects everyone:





"These vegetables maintain a much higher quality than the ones I buy in a store. One of the reasons I joined the ring is because I want locally produced ingredients, and I also enjoy the chance to buy directly from producers. For me, it feels really good that the money goes straight to the producers and that stores don't take a big share. I also buy meat. I like that it's fresh and appreciate its organic production."

IDA FORSMAN
Landsbygdens folk newspaper, 2013

PHOTO: JONAS HARALD



Corinne Forsman at one of the first REKO-meetings in Jakobstad.

"It's part of our social environment and connected to tradition, culture, nutrition, science, and technology. Food not only has an impact on our health and wellbeing, but also on the environment because it's a consumable that must be continuously replaced. Our relationship to food is both individual and social, and there are concerns that this relationship is changing and that food is becoming increasingly alien to us. Few consumers are nowadays aware of their food's origin. They don't necessarily know what the food contains, where it comes from, and who has produced it. ... There is a need for fundamental change because the global food system has shown to be inefficient, unjust, and incapable of producing enough healthy food for the entire world population. Alternative local-level food networks for the production, distribution, and consumption of sustainable

food have emerged in protest. Consumers and producers are trying to find their way back to each other by creating different forms of direct sales without middlemen. Interest in locally produced food is one of the fastest growing trends today."

The reasons are global. Heidi Barman-Geust states that the global food system has shown to be inefficient and that food is distributed in an unjust manner.

"One and a half billion people are overweight and diet-related diseases are on the rise, whilst one billion people go hungry. The World Bank Group, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization are criticized because they favour major producers and are unable to solve famine. Current trade agreements don't allow producers to take into account cultivation areas' ecological, social, economic, and cultural characteristics, and small farmers are usually hit hardest. Farmers are forced to produce increasingly more at an increasingly lower price. The rural population, especially in developing countries, is forced to move into cities to work for the industry and service sector. The food industry's principal objective is not to provide people with healthy food in sufficient quantities – it is economic growth and competitiveness. Challenges also arise in step with climate change and population growth. It's estimated that around 35% of world emissions of greenhouse gases originate from the food system and that the global population will rise to nine billion by 2050. In order to provide this population with food, food production must be doubled compared to today's situation." ●

Consumer Values

Which aspects are most important when buying food?

- 1 The food tastes good
- 2 The food is domestic
- 3 Low food prices
- 4 The food is healthy
- 5 The food does not contain additives
- 6 The animals' living conditions
- 7 The food is GMO-free
- 8 Producers receive compensation for their work
- 9 The food is high in fiber
- 10 Food production's environmental impact
- 11 The food/product is familiar since before
- 12 Quality of the fat
- 13 The food is locally produced
- 14 The food contains little salt
- 15 Producer or brand
- 16 The food is organic
- 17 The food is fat-free
- 18 Fair trade
- 19 The food is artisanally produced

Source: *Från jord till bord, utan mellanhänder*



PHOTO: NADIA BOUSSIR

EIGHT YEARS LATER

REKO, Hope and Magic

Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes, from the blog Sustaining Roots

Today is exactly eight years since I came in contact with the idea of REKO for the first time, Facebook just reminded me. I was apparently so excited with this idea that I documented it with a picture of the announcement in the local newspaper about the planning meeting that was to be held on January 29th, 2013.

IT IS KIND OF NICE to have that memory pop up in my feed now as it makes me think about what REKO has meant both for me and for the local food scene in my community, in Finland, and beyond.

For myself, the REKO food network came to mean numerous things. First, it meant that I got to know a whole bunch of new people right after my return to my hometown after 16 years away. I returned as a doctoral student with affiliation to a research community in Helsinki, working mostly alone on topics that not many people around here were interested in. Having REKO as my free-time activism not only helped keep me sane through all those years of writing research papers out of my work/home office, but it got me connected with people who shared the same concerns and interests in local and sustainable food.

I also got to know a lot of farmers. And when I say a lot, I mean A LOT. Before REKO, I

think I only knew one farmer who happened to be a contact established through other acquaintances in Helsinki, and through those contacts he became our supplier of grass-fed beef during our last years in the big city. But REKO got me connected to farmers both here in my own region, and later to farmers in the rest of the country and in the Nordics, and lately to farmers all over the globe. I remember listening to the dialects spoken at those first farmer meetings thinking wow, people still speak such beautiful Ostrobothnian dialects that I associate with my childhood! I had not heard much of these place-based dialects during my years far away from home. So, REKO also got me grounded, back in my home culture, almost overnight.

REKO gave my family locally produced food without having to travel far and wide. I had already planned to collect names and addresses of farms that could provide us

Read more

Maria Ehrnström-Fuentes tells of her research in the blogs:

sustainingroots.wordpress.com
worldsintransition.com

with local food in the region. REKO made the logistics much easier and practically handed me a list of farmers who had something to sell directly to consumers. REKO also gave me a post doc research topic and a community of food researchers doing fascinating research on alternative food movements and local food. I now know a lot more than I ever wished I could know about the potentials and challenges of doing food in alternative ways, the structural constraints, the possibilities that come with organizing supply chains differently, the never-ending discussions on price, the exclusionary features of alternative markets for marginalized communities, the risks of consumer/producer dropouts, the collective learning that can occur within these types of organizations, and so much more. My REKO research also gave me insights to other models of community-supported agriculture around the world.

But maybe most importantly, REKO gave me hope, an active hope (to cite Joanna Macy) that things can actually change when the right people with the right idea come together to do the right thing at the right time. I have seen my community develop from having no access to local food to having all the access to what is currently available at nearby local farms. I have seen people become filled with joy from having access to local food and learning to know the farmers who produce their food. I have seen farmers become confident when they realized there is more hope for their future than what the current system had in store for them. I have seen countless Instagram

pictures of kitchen tables filled with locally produced food. I have seen a cauliflower harvest come to good use instead of being wasted (I have to add, probably the most amazing experience of them all).

REKO gave me hope to believe in magic. Because how else can REKO be explained than through magic? Magic is what happens when a small group of people come together with the right tools and the right mindset to take an idea and make it real. And with that insight and sense of hope, I am convinced that magic can happen everywhere. REKO is maybe not the end of things, but it surely was a good start on new hopeful, magical events waiting to happen once we put our minds/hearts to work. ●

***worldsintransition.com** focuses on the transition towards more sustainable forms of living, a trend all over the Swedish-speaking Finland. People who sow the seeds to new worlds, worlds that are just waiting to see the light of day if we only give them a chance. It is about both the inner and outer transformation, of living more in harmony with oneself, one's surroundings, and the nature that forms the foundation for the conditions of life on this planet. Through our own choices and relations to our surroundings, we have a chance to influence the type of world we want to live in now and in the future. The blog is part of the research project **Organising From The Grassroots – Territorial Movements and Their Role in Building Sustainable Futures**. The project has received funding from the Academy of Finland and the Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland, and it is carried out at Hanken School of Economics in Vaasa.*



ANNE EKSTRAND, THE MAYOR OF JAKOBSTAD

“REKO Is My Mushroom Forest”

I was born in the countryside and grew up buying milk, butter, cheese, and cream from a dairy farm, tomatoes and cucumber from a local greenhouse, eggs from a poultry farm, and eating our self-grown potatoes.

I’VE BEEN A CUSTOMER at REKO almost since the beginning, from the first pick-ups at Optima’s parking lot many years ago. There are some products I buy almost exclusively from REKO, such as eggs.

What I like most about REKO is that I’m guaranteed fresh produce directly from the producer. And I can also buy things that I couldn’t get anywhere else, such as smoked and still warm perch, like last time. Or hanger steak, which I’ve never seen in shops. It was excellent prepared in Sous Vide. I find

my early fruit from REKO in the spring, and it is my mushroom forest and berry bushes in the autumn. Some of the products that we have learned to know via REKO can now also be found in grocery stores. REKO gives an account of what is produced in the local region, and the supply varies from one REKO ring to another.

The sellers have become my good acquaintances, and some of the customers I see almost always and perhaps only at REKO. ●



“I can also buy things that I couldn’t get anywhere else, such as smoked and still warm perch.”

ANNE EKSTRAND



REKO

is nowadays a global movement with members on most continents. Here are the stories of 15 admins and key persons from all over the world.





 **CHARLOTTE BACKMAN**

Rural developer, Hushållningssällskapet

When REKO Came to Sweden

I was looking for a method to shorten the distance between producers and consumers in the spring 2016. After a long and inspirational discussion with Thomas Snellman, I felt that I had stumbled onto something that could make a big difference.

I WORKED as a rural developer for the Rural Economy and Agricultural Society in Skaraborg, Sweden, from 2007 to 2017. During this time, I carried out various projects and assignments, and a great many of them were about local food in different forms. In the spring 2016, Skaraborg's federation of municipalities tasked me with finding good examples on how to simplify distribution channels and reduce the distance between producers and consumers. This task was carried out in cooperation with the municipality of Grästorps, the resource center Locally Produced in West (Lokalproducerat i Väst), and the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF) in Grästorps.

I actually stumbled onto REKO rings by chance when I contacted Eva Hallin from the online store Glada Lådan in Östersund to learn more about her concept. She happened to ask me if I was familiar with Finland's REKO rings. I googled the concept immediately after our conversation to learn more. Amongst the things I found was an article written by Thomas Snellman, published by the Swedish Board of Agriculture.

But figuring out the next step was not that simple. I met with Sofia Jessen, Gräs-

torps new rural developer, in the summer 2016. I was somewhat discouraged because we had called numerous farmers and invited them to workshops focusing on new distribution channels, but nobody wanted to participate. Sofia and I decided right then and there to try out the concept I had accidentally found. We decided to start a REKO ring in our little Grästorps and to also test another concept of selling shares in beef cattle that we had discovered in the Skåne Province.

SAID AND DONE – we started Sweden's first REKO ring in September, consisting of three producers and around ten customers at the first pick-up. But it was a beginning. A couple of days later, Sofia and I joined beef farmer Niclas Dagman to sell shares of his beef cattle at an agricultural fair in Grästorps.

One part of the project focused on increasing knowledge amongst producers, which is why we had planned to carry out a study trip during spring 2016. However, just as before, it proved difficult to gather enough interested participants. We discarded the plan in the autumn 2016 and, instead, invited Thomas Snellman to visit

us in Skaraborg and talk about the concept of REKO rings.

Thomas came to Sweden in late January 2017, and I had planned out a total of four meetings in four different cities. Attracting participants turned out to be much easier this time, and all four meetings were well-attended. However, the most fantastic outcome of these meetings was that REKO rings were formed directly in conjunction with them – the ball was finally rolling. One of the rings that were started was the ring in Skövde, which became Sweden's largest REKO ring.

This was my last project with the Rural Economy and Agricultural Society. My post as a rural developer ended only a couple of weeks later and I moved on to a job as a marketing director for the Next Skövde tourism company. Nonetheless, I couldn't have received a better ending for my ten years of service than being a part of and initiating the concept of REKO rings in Sweden. I remember our little tour and how Thomas believed that REKO rings had the potential to receive greater success in Sweden than in Finland – but we never believed it would happen so fast. The time was simply ripe, and several years of hard work by our region's many different actors had prepared our local producers well for the challenge. It was well that we didn't give up that one day in June, Sofia and I, and that we simply decided to try out our idea!

Sofia and I were rewarded for our work in the autumn 2018 when we were nominated as one of four finalists for Sweden's



REKO has its own logo in Sweden.

Blåslampan Consumer Award. It didn't matter that we didn't win – the big winners are all the producers who've found a local market for their products via REKO rings. The greatest heroes are all the admins of Sweden's REKO rings who tirelessly work to maintain their rings. ●



 **CAMILLA BENDER LARSON**

Swedish Board of Agriculture



 **EEVA YLINEN**

Development Manager, Ahlman

Shopping Locally is the New Normal

REKO rings fill a great need. Even if there probably will come a day when REKO's growth slows down, the movement has created positive effects that benefit rural development and increase knowledge about and trust in locally produced food.

I MET Thomas Snellman in Ekenäs, Finland, in the autumn 2016 and had the chance to hear his stories about the REKO movement. I was invited to speak about Swedish food culture to the first ever Finnish Championship in Food Craftmanship, representing the Swedish Board of Agriculture. I was seated next to Thomas by chance during the award ceremony's dinner. I was fascinated by REKO rings' history and development in Finland and the attention Thomas had received through his work. I was also captivated by his commitment and the positive effects that arise from distributing products from small-scale food producers directly to the consumers – not to mention the significance of the ensuing encounters. At this time, there were around 200 REKO rings in Finland and Sweden's first REKO ring had just been started. Thomas said that he faced a heavy workload with giving support to REKO rings' admins, and providing support for a growing number of Swedish REKO rings would be difficult to keep up with. It was at that moment that a seed was planted for an idea that I took

home with me to Sweden. The idea consisted of a national information campaign, a so-called REKO base, which would provide support for new establishments of REKO rings in Sweden – similar to the role Thomas has for Finnish REKO rings. In dialogue with Thomas and several active REKO admins, a procurement was formulated and the idea launched. Skaraborg's Rural Economy and Agricultural Societies received the commission, and they have provided support to the REKO movement via various information campaigns since 2017. Now, some years later, there are around 230 rings in Sweden with circa 870,000 members, and new rings keep constantly turning up. Buying locally and sustainably produced food is a trend that keeps growing in strength. It has become the new good and normal choice, according to Swedish business intelligence analysts¹ ●

¹*Smaka Sverige, Mathantverk – unika smakrika produkter för konsumenter* (2020)

Read more: <http://smakasverige.se/nyheter/nyhetsarkiv/2020-10-23-mathantverk---unika-smakrika-produkter-for-konsumenter>

New, Much-Needed Method

The encounter between producer and consumer – and the ensuing trust – is at the heart of REKO, allowing the consumer to experience that they can become an essential and influential part of the food chain.

AHLMAN has long striven to develop the operations of SME's as part of short food chains. Anu Tuomola, who had participated in a sheep project, hinted in 2013 about a worthwhile concept that had originated in Ostrobothnia, namely the local REKO food ring. I was working with the *Parasta Pöytään Pirkanmaalta* (Best to the Table from Pirkanmaa) project and decided to contact Thomas Snellman. I soon realized that I was dealing with a completely new method that brought local food within reach of consumers in a way that had never been seen before.

I began to prepare the establishment of REKO rings in Finland's Pirkanmaa region. Because the operations were new and there was hardly any information to be had, we carried out a great many information campaigns, wrote Finnish guidelines, and initially also drafted contracts for producers and consumers within the REKO rings. The first ring was started in the municipality of Vesilahti in 2014. Over the next few months, rings were established in the municipality of Lempäälä and the cities of Akaa, Nokia, and Kangasala, and soon rings were popping up all over the Pirkanmaa region. The number of REKO rings in

Pirkanmaa stabilized to 22, meaning that rings are nowadays found in almost every municipality in the region.

I introduced the concept to the *True Flavours* (Aitoja Makuja) network and received numerous invitations to speak about the topic all over Southern Finland. Facebook groups were created for admins and producers to enable discussions and peer counselling. There are currently 314 admins in the group and 528 members in the group for producers and admins. We eventually realized that there was a need for more detailed, jointly prepared rules and guidelines. A group of admins, producers, and developers gathered in the city of Seinäjoki in November 2015 to ponder the rules and the need for an association, under the National Local Food Coordination Project.

REKO is a matter of the heart and has opened eyes to locally produced food. I firmly believe that locally produced food would not have gained its current foothold in consumer households without REKO. ●



 **RICHARD PERKINS**

Farmer and co-owner at Ridgedale Farm

"Ridgedale Farm is a high-quality local food producer and pioneering educational site. We are excited about facilitating the next generation of entrepreneurial young farmers getting set up profitably on the land through powerful and focused learning experiences."

www.ridgedalepermaculture.com

How to Build a Local Customer Base

Selling is half the work of making a small farm work, and finding the shortest route between the farm and local customers is vital to the overall efficiency and economy of the operation.

FROM THE very beginning of Ridgedale Farm, we developed subscription sales and buying clubs as our primary modes of selling. But it is also important to point out that a huge amount of time was invested in this area in the first couple of years.

We farm in a relatively remote and low-populated area in Sweden, and the fact that we have been able to sell the quantity and diversity of products that we do locally is perhaps one of the most impressive aspects of our farm. It will take time for any farm to build up a local customer base, and for our scale of operation, combined with the amount of diverse products we create, it is a half-time role for one person to deal with the logistics and administration of the sales. Thankfully, models like REKO have spread much more widely, and we have now directed all our sales through this modality.

Over the past few years, we have watched as REKO has facilitated hundreds of new farmers getting started with an immediate route to market, albeit on the back of such hard work of so many. When

we started running drop-off points back in 2014, we would organize the customers by location and have them meet us in suitable car parks at a set time every week. Throughout the first year or two, we offered other producers to join us, but the idea was perhaps too novel. It has been fun to see how the same model, branded under the REKO ring here in Scandinavia, has spread so effectively.

We began in McDonald's car parks, turning up on dark winter nights with pastured eggs, pre-sold meat chickens and vegetable boxes, and having customers meet us in a 30-minute window. It was immediately effective for us, and something that has been key to being able to manage everything going on at our farm. We operated our early buying clubs outside cafés and shops who preempted the foot traffic they would receive as customers came in for coffee, etc. We timed our drop-off points with the end of the working day, choosing locations on main roads that were easy for everyone across the town to reach. We offered information to customers, such as



PHOTO: RIDGEDALE FARM

recipes or a brief guide on breaking down a chicken and ways to use it all effectively. It was immediately successful for us, but all the while we wished other producers with complimentary products would join us; knowing that if a customer could find their weekly produce needs in one place, it could become entirely more attractive.

WHEN REKO TOOK HOLD in Sweden, we engaged ourselves in establishing four local rings, which we set up at the same time and location as our existing drop-offs. This brought the benefit of more diverse products via other producers, along with their own customer base, thus exposing

our product portfolio to a much wider range of people. Remarkably, in our larger selling location, Karlstad, a town of 70,000 people, 13,500 people have actively decided to join the REKO ring. That makes up nearly 1 in 5 people in the town who have consciously decided to actively seek local integrity food!

As it is hosted on Facebook, everything is transparent and you can see the sales and offerings of all the other producers. Whilst this might seem counterintuitive for business to some sellers, it is my experience that this creates a healthy kind of competition where everyone is encouraged to perform and refine their products and



PHOTO: RIDGEDALE FARM

presentation. It allows you as a producer to keep track of trends and monitor your own sales against other producers.

I like to describe REKO as a pre-sold farmer's market, and because produce is pre-sold, this helps get around trading regulations, which means it is relatively easy to organize a suitable space to meet, such as a large car park. It is now our preferred sales model for its efficiency, and I would go as far as to say it is the optimal sales method compared to what I have seen anywhere around the world. The fact that Facebook is so ubiquitous is a large part of the model's success in my mind.

IN THE RINGS we participate, there are other vegetable, egg, dairy, meat, and charcuterie producers, as well as bakers and producers of other artisanal products. And herein lies the key to a successful ring: having enough diversity of produce that it really attracts a critical mass of customers.

People can order up until a specified time ahead of the event and we then compile the orders into a spreadsheet to facilitate vegetable harvest and the subsequent packing of eggs and meat, etc. We harvest vegetables the morning of delivery, and everything is bunched and ready in the chiller. The rings we participate in take place in the late afternoon and early evening. After lunch, we pack vegetable boxes and custom orders, and load the van with any chilled or frozen meats. Everything reaches the customers within one hour of leaving the farm, which enables us to deliver everything in simple insulated boxes

or stackable crates. This simplifies logistics and means we do not need a refrigerated vehicle to maintain the quality of produce, which saves a large investment and running cost.

You are not allowed to sell items at the drop-off point, everything must be pre-sold and it is the comments on the Facebook group that create the 'sales contract', as it were. Each ring must also define its own rules and policies. Here in Sweden, local is valued more than certified organic, for example, so the focus within the REKO rings that we are part of is high-quality, locally produced food. There are both certified organic producers and other small-scale producers farming more conventionally.

Several meetings amongst the producer ring are needed to establish guidelines, as well as meetings throughout subsequent years to address issues that come up throughout the process. Naturally, issues come up from time to time, as with any group process, but the ongoing refinement and clarification of core values stands to benefit all in the long run. It creates a supportive network amongst engaged producers and, generally, it seems people want to help each other out. Something we see is that the type of people showing up to purchase at these rings are the type of people that really want this type of farming to exist in their community.

Personally, I think REKO is a fantastic working platform because it maintains a small amount of direct customer relating, yet it is concise enough that you do not

have to talk to someone for 30 minutes who is only buying a single tray of eggs. Clearly, personal interaction is very important in relationship marketing, yet even looking someone in the eyes and exchanging a few words and a smile is all that is needed to create that.

It is important to keep this operation tight, and it is such a joy to turn up and be able to drop off 4,000–5,000 euros worth of products in one hour and then be back at the farm to finish up chores for the day.

After the event the Facebook page is cleared and you can immediately replace the advertisement with the next week's offerings. This is often a 'copy and paste' of the previous week, so it does not take much time. It is the producer's responsibility to clear their previous thread, which keeps the interface clean. It works very well and we have had very few issues.

It is important to stress the critical mass of producers necessary to create enough ground swell to make these rings effective and successful. Whilst there are REKO rings of different sizes across the country now, I would say that it is good to try and gather 8 to 10 producers minimum that cover all the staple food bases in order to give it a good trial. If you are pioneering this model in another country, it will take some additional work, but I can assure you it is well worth it. I have not seen a model as efficient and simple as this, and I imagine it will continue to spread in the coming years. We have seen many of our students take the model to other continents and countries over the past couple of years

"Over the past few years, we have watched as REKO has facilitated hundreds of new farmers getting started with an immediate route to market."

RICHARD PERKINS

and it's a pleasure to see the continued spread and growth in Scandinavia. It is a model that has literally created farmers, by offering new and existing farmers a simple yet powerful modality to reach a broad and caring customer base with relative ease.

The skills required to be successful in farming today are remarkably different even to one generation ago. It would be easy for a new farmer to take a REKO ring for granted, not seeing the enormous amount of volunteered time invested by founders and administrators. Yet, if it facilitates the birth and transition of new and existing farmers towards a future based on the regeneration of soils and habitats, more dynamic social and community interactions, and increased local food resilience, then we must give thanks for that. Regeneration of our soils, our communities, and local economies is surely the great work of our time. ●



 **NADIA SIMARD**
Undercover Farm

Inspired by the French AMAP

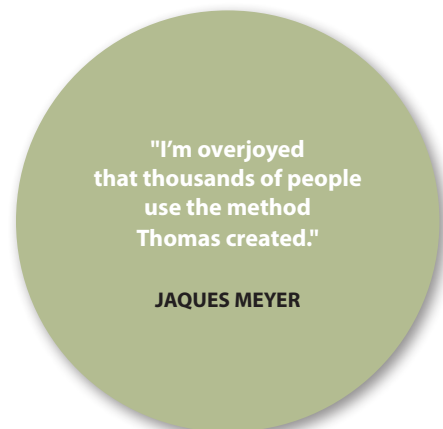
During my stays in Finland with my daughter, I was always surprised not to see any local produce in grocery stores – I only found anonymously mass-produced and imported products.

TOGETHER with my friend Thomas Snellman, I visited several farms and found that also Finnish producers grew fruit and vegetables, but they sold their produce via other channels. There were no direct sales – or they were very small-scale – and channels were difficult to find.

When Thomas came to France to organize a trainee exchange programme for French exchange students, I introduced him to the AMAP direct sales system, which enabled the selling of fruit, vegetables, honey, cheese, beef, and bread straight to consumers.

That same day, we visited a baker, a meat producer, and a goat's cheese producer, ending our little tour with a visit to a direct sales market in the afternoon. At the marketplace, Thomas had the opportunity to talk with everyone present, both producers and consumers. We talked about the organizational model and the advantages of this type of exchange. I believe it was at this moment that Thomas found inspiration to create what later became known as REKO.

He was able to adapt what he had seen and heard to Finland's conditions. For my part, I had only brought him together with



"I'm overjoyed that thousands of people use the method Thomas created."

JAQUES MEYER

these actors. It was very simple because I myself had worked in the producer circles for many years. My contribution to what happened later was rather modest.

I'm overjoyed that thousands of people use the method Thomas created. REKO brings additional value to all who seek quality products via direct sales and who want to ensure that the producers receive an appropriate compensation. ●

Access to Local Food

I wanted to scale up my farm but lacked the time and resources to join a second farmer's market. After researching additional ways to sell my products, I came across the REKO concept in December 2018.

MY NAME IS Nadia Simard and I am the owner of Undercover Farm, a small market garden in Ontario, Canada. Many small farms in this area are operated by a single person or by a young family with children. I first studied the AMAP system in France, and during my research I came across an article about REKO. I soon found myself down a rabbit hole, reading all I could about the concept, joining all the active REKO groups I could find.

Once I felt serious about starting the first group here in Cobourg, I communicated with Thomas Snellman who, along with Amy Lam, Rebekka Bond and other admins, graciously answered my many questions. Andre Kauerauf from South Africa was also very helpful. Their Facebook page was written in English, and they kindly gave us permission to use their wording.

The concept was very simple. With the help and support of a local farming friend, Andrew Vokes, we worked together to create the first REKO network in Canada.

In the spring of 2019, we launched the Cobourg REKO network. The concept was very well-received and is continuously growing. For the farmers, it offers efficien-

cy and time-saving advantages. Customers love the extra access to local food and, of course, the direct relationship to the people who grow/produce their food.

We also received a small grant from the Carrot Cache, which allowed us to have a website and a logo created. We try to stay as close as we can to the original concept in the way that we operate. Of course, we changed a few things, as laws and requirements differ based on your country/province.

AS WE ALL KNOW, the global health crisis brought on many issues. We were glad to have a REKO ring already in place that needed minimal adjustments to continue to operate successfully. Today, we have four active REKO's in the province of Ontario and a handful of groups at various stages of setting up. This has become an international, grassroots movement that we are proud to be a part of. ●



 **ALBERTO MENGHI**

Senior Researcher, Research Centre for Animal Production Foundation

The Simplest Method Is Often the Best

With the spread of Internet and technology, a new opportunity emerged to find new ways to sell food, but the first experience was not very satisfying. REKO changed all this. A simple system proved to be the best.

I AM AN Agricultural Economist. In all my studies and work, I have been interested in the supply chain value distribution in food markets. It was always very clear how unbalanced the value distribution between producers and big retailers was, which is the reason why we are losing many small farms, jobs, and territory protection.

The Internet players (from Amazon to smaller networks) were not able to balance the value in the supply chain, the logistics were too heavy and, at the end, the price of the product at farm-level could not be sufficient and the comparison with wholesale prices was not that big. It is interesting how this mechanism is similar in all western countries.

I have been monitoring all direct sales systems in Italy for many years, and none of them was offering any satisfactory solution. It was also clear that it was not desirable to promote direct sales; the industry was fighting against it with more power than the farmers. The clearest example was in the dairy sector. More than ten years ago, dairy farmers started to buy

milk vending machines to sell milk directly to consumers. They had a good margin because store prices were high, and the numbers started to increase. At the same time, the processing industry realized that they could lose the fresh milk market and quickly launched a strong campaign against this raw milk, pointing to sanitary risks. They even pushed politicians to put restrictions on farms, but the main issue was a media campaign to move consumers away. This is how the direct sales of milk died in Italy.

When I heard the story of REKO in 2016, I was surprised how such an easy solution with Facebook groups could overcome a lot of the bottlenecks experimented by direct food sales.

After thousands of questions to Thomas Snellman, I took this idea back to Italy. Most people did not understand what I was talking about, so we had a first meeting where I explained REKO. The next step was to involve local authorities – here in Italy, farmer's markets have a lot of rules and bureaucracy, and farmers wanted to get the green light to go forward with

PHOTO: ALBERTO MENGHI



REKO. It took more than one year for the local municipality to agree to start a REKO group.

After a few months, we created the first REKO group. But, again, we faced difficulties with the bureaucracy – this method was not specifically covered by the current legislation. Furthermore, agriculture is not managed by municipalities but regions or central state, so they could not give permission locally. Finally, a lady from the local Ministry of Social Cohesion thought REKO was a good idea and promoted it against the sleeping bureaucracy.

The delivery in Reggio Emilia started in February 2018. In general, it has been half

a disaster. Some farmers were not ready to use social media to sell products and interact correctly with consumers. Unfortunately, we had a bad start and lost a large number of consumers. By the summer, REKO was about to die. But we had a few farmers that did not give up, and there was a bit of a recovery. The second group was doing very well until the COVID pandemic put everything on hold. Farmer's markets were closed from time to time, while supermarkets stayed open. In this situation, local authorities didn't know how to manage REKO since it was not in any category or legislation. The situation improved slowly, and now a third REKO group has started. ●



 **ANDRE KAUEAUF**

Bramleigh Farm

REKO Creates Business – and Friends

Farmer’s markets are a great way to meet new customers and to educate people about what we do, but the time that is taken up does not make it worthwhile. After setting up REKO, all this changed – REKO helped us become profitable.

MY WIFE AND I officially started our small-scale farm, Bramleigh Farm, at the beginning of 2018. Producing food items for ourselves with excess to sell was a new experience for us. We attended a few farmer’s markets in our region and also set up an email subscription list for our local customers. We already started to have a sense that selling at traditional markets was not as efficient as our email order sales.

Richard Perkins of Ridgedale Farm in Sweden has been a big inspiration for us. He had mentioned REKO in a few of his videos, and that is how we first learned about the model. We were very excited by this new model, but we had doubts about it working in our country and lacked the confidence to set one up as we were so new to direct sales.

Towards the end of 2018, as our confidence grew and our network of like-minded producers increased, we decided to try to set up our first REKO ring in our village, Nottingham Road. Altogether, I think there were about eight producers, and our Face-

book group membership grew in numbers each week. REKO Notties seemed to reach its maximum member engagement quite quickly as the village is small and our producer offering was limited. Nonetheless, it was a great proof of concept and gave us the experience we needed to start two more REKO rings in two larger towns close to us.

In early 2019, we set up REKO Howick and REKO Hilton. As these towns had a much bigger population, we managed to attract more producers and more producers also attracted more consumers.

The most successful of the three has definitely been the REKO ring in Hilton. Hilton has a lot of younger families and is also the closest town to our provincial capital city, Pietermaritzburg. REKO Hilton now has between 25 and 28 weekly producers advertising and roughly 1,000 active consumers.

We can honestly say that the REKO model has been the primary reason that our farm has managed to become profitable and for both Kait and I to commit to our



PHOTO: BRAMLEIGH FARM



farm business full time. The model seems so simple at first, yet the needs that are met, for both producer and consumer, are quite substantial and diverse. The community that has formed around our REKO rings has built multiple life-long friendships and facilitated invaluable business relationships between producers. Fundamentally, REKO relies on trust between producer and consumer. Being able to witness this trust on a weekly basis has really highlighted to me how trust has been eroded away in our conventional food system. A lot of people are genuinely surprised that their orders are actually delivered at the right time and in the right place.

As the group of producers has grown, we have also been able to keep each other accountable and maintain production transparency.

Our main struggles have been with managing people, which always happens when a group of people get together to coordinate something. Some admins do more work than others to keep the group

running. Some producers have lots of opinions about problems but do not present any solutions. All in all, once the ring has been running for a few months, it seems to start to self-organise and the admin load drops dramatically.

WE HAD A BIG INCREASE in consumers joining when our country went into the first COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020. Most of those new members have stayed active. During this first lockdown, we changed the collection to a drive-thru style. The producers found an open parking lot with an entrance and an exit with enough space to create a loop. Consumers would drive past with their names printed on a paper in the window. Once the producer had identified them, they would take the order to the car and either place it on the back seat or in the boot of the car. This worked very well and it meant that we were not creating a gathering of people if all the consumers remained in their cars. ●



 **OSKAR LORENTZON**

Sheep farmer and REKO admin

Driving Force is the Ideal Involvement

One of the toughest problems in small-scale food production is figuring out logistics so that they don't eat up too much of the price. And the model also has to be simple enough for customers to make them change their shopping habits. The solution is REKO – a simple and genius concept.

I FIRST MET Thomas Snellman when he came to Sweden to give inspirational and informative talks about REKO rings as an alternative sales channel for local food producers to reach consumers. I worked as an advisor at the resource center Lokalt Producerat i Väst (Lokalproducerat i Väst) and participated in three of his events in the municipalities of Tidaholm, Borås, and Grästorp. I also had the chance to be his chauffeur to and from these places, and I got to know Thomas a little and gain a deeper insight and understanding of REKO. What had Thomas done that few others had managed to solve?

One of the toughest problems with small-scale food production is figuring out logistics so that they don't eat up too much of the price. The next challenge is to make the model simple enough for the customers to get hold of locally produced food as well as to make them change their shopping habits. The solution here – as in most other cases – is as simple as it is genius: a Facebook group, someone who agrees to

administer it, a parking lot, and a specific time. Of course, you also need some visibility and a group of producers who want to sell their products, but these tend to work themselves out.

Quite a lot of producers attended the inspirational meeting in Borås, and it also attracted some consumers and interested politicians and municipal employees. The atmosphere was good and slightly excited. When the meeting began, I sat down and started a Facebook group for a REKO ring in Borås in order to capitalize on the immediate interest.

Thomas talked about the movement's successes in Finland, of local producers who had expanded their operations with good profitability, and of chain store purchasers who were suddenly challenged by the producers themselves.

Before the meeting ended, one of the local politicians had called the Borås Tidning newspaper and asked for a journalist to drop by. In addition, the radio was also contacted and a live interview booked. My

gut feeling told me that this could become something big, even in Sweden!

The REKO ring in Borås was the third in Sweden, and a great deal has happened since then. The success of REKO in the Sjuhärad region is partly due to the local tradition or culture of selling one's produce where one operates. The region is home to a lot of traditional agroforestry, where people themselves produce what they need to survive the winter. This differs from more fertile plains, where it's part of the culture to produce to larger markets.

The attention around REKO began to buzz after Thomas returned back to Finland. Newspapers wrote about the movement, several rings were started, and admins created networks to support each other. Many late evenings and nights were spent discussing rules, limitations, and challenges with Facebook, among others the updates and posts that weren't approved because they contained photos of animals or plants (for instance potato haulm), which Facebook's image analysis program considered illegal substances. The admin community was and is characterized by an immense driving force and will. Many are involved in their own local REKO rings but also in a national discussion group, which was founded at quite an early stage.

I feel that REKO functions at its best when it's run by one or more committed consumers. When producers run a ring, there is always the risk that it's not done for the best of the consumers and the ring, but only to create a sales channel. I believe that the ring must exist for the consumers and



"REKO is an absolute market economy. If the information is clear, consumers can choose who and what production they want to support."

OSKAR LORENTZON

that a large supply attracts buyers. From the ring's perspective, it doesn't matter if there are one or four egg producers or ten different vegetable producers. REKO is an absolute market economy. If the information is clear, consumers can choose who and what they want to support. Producers who don't have attractive products, production philosophies, or production models will not sell as many products.

An unexpected outcome of REKO is that the producers now have colleagues – they nowadays meet regularly at various REKO drop-offs in the region. This has also created a distribution network with producers who buy from each other and help each other to deliver products. A more expected outcome is the consumers' increased understanding of food production. REKO has made small-scale food production visible and also contributed to increased production. ●



 **KIRSI VILJANEN**

Senior Specialist, Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry

REKO Supports the Government's Targets

The Finnish Government's Local Food Programme was adopted in 2013. One of the programme's targets is to make local food easily available to consumers and to create several sales channels among which producers and processors can find the most suitable and profitable ones for themselves. The programme also strives to facilitate the direct sales of local food.

REKO's launch in Finland coincided with the Local Food Programme's adoption and hit its core: locally produced high-quality food for consumers and more diverse sales channels for producers. The rapid spread of REKO activities first throughout Finland – and later all over the world – showed that consumers have a clear need for different ways to buy produce.

Several studies prove that the most important purchase criteria for local food are to support local producers and ensure that they receive a better price for their products. This is, undoubtedly, also one of REKO's keys to success: REKO's definition includes fairness. The sales of local food without middlemen gives the producers a fairer price, and the buyer also knows for sure what they pay for.

Thanks to the REKO model, even small quantities of agricultural products and processed products have found a good, new sales channel, bringing entrepreneurs additional income. As awareness

about REKO spreads and its rings grow in number, product quantities that are sold via REKO continue to rise, thus increasing the competitiveness of local food. Consumers involved in REKO rings are also loyal buyers, which means that producers and processors venture to expand their production. This supports local employment.

Moreover, REKO creates refreshing sociality and a sense of community between and amongst producers and consumers. The consumer receives produce straight from the producer, which enables him or her to give the producer direct feedback and also offer development suggestions. The producers get to know each other which, in turn, fosters the establishment of innovative cooperation networks in support of e.g. product or logistics development.

REKO is a Finnish innovation on how local food can be sold without cumbersome bureaucracy or systems. Our food legislation allows great flexibility for producers

PHOTO: ADA TROGEN, HELSINGIN YLIOPISTON RURALIA-INSTITUUTTI



Photos from REKO Seinäjoki's pick-up, August 28th, 2020.

who run small-scale distributions to local markets. REKO's founders and developers have expertly utilized and streamlined this flexibility to create a model that is as producer- and consumer-friendly as possible.

The Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has also been asked for more detailed guidelines that can be applied in REKO activities. REKO's strength and uniqueness lie in its grassroots origin and voluntary activities; definitions, methods, and instructions have been formulated in cooperation amongst the actors. We will continue to respect this self-reliance even in the future. ●

"REKO is a Finnish innovation on how local food can be sold without cumbersome bureaucracy or systems."

KIRSI VILJANEN



 **BRYNJA LAXDAL**

Project Manager, Ministry of Industries and Innovation

REKO Charmed the Norwegian Press

Distribution is a bottleneck for many producers. Therefore, it is important to find affordable and efficient sales channels that are also minimally bureaucratic, accessible to all, and reach a wide market.

A **STUDY TRIP** was organized in September 2017 to Västra Götaland County in Sweden, together with Magne Stenersen from Eidsvoll Municipality's Farmers and Smallholders Union (Eidsvoll BS). The goal of the trip was to find out whether REKO rings could work for Norwegian producers. We visited eight farms that sold their produce via REKO and also attended several pick-ups.

Swedish REKO rings had been active for one year in the autumn 2017. The concept had already been established in over 50 localities, and it had given numerous producers an opportunity to increase their revenue and profitability.

In order to raise awareness of REKO in Norway, we arranged a seminar and sent invitations to the movement's founder, Thomas Snellman, and administrator of REKO Borås in Sweden, Oscar Lorentzon. Feedback on the seminar was positive, and we decided to start several rings during the winter 2017–2018. Planning took off in consultation with Swedish admins and with the help of Thomas. We also familia-

rized ourselves with all the studies and articles that had been published about REKO. A large part of the work was about spreading information and reaching out on social media. We can now clearly see that we were successful – REKO is covered widely in the Norwegian press, radio, and television, and hundreds of articles about REKO have been published all over the country. Many of them encourage people to buy local produce. REKO is clearly a media product here in Norway, and its visibility is also the reason why the concept has grown so rapidly.

There is always a need for follow-up and development, and we have worked a lot with the concept of organic products. The demand for organic food has been greater than its supply, which has unfortunately led to several producers marketing their produce as organic – without a valid certificate. To avoid this, we have tried to find solutions together with the Debio organization, informed producers, and contacted those who want to certify their products. ●

Changing the Farmers' Mindset

I spearheaded a temporary project funded by the Icelandic Government, Matarauður Íslands – Iceland's Culinary Treasures. The goal was to strengthen domestic infrastructure and involve food in tourism, Icelandic food culture, and innovations with special consideration on sustainability.

I WAS INTRODUCED to Thomas Snellman's idea of firsthand business for farmers (REKO) in early 2017. I was delighted to meet Thomas in person at the EMBLA Awards later that year along with my colleague from the Icelandic Association of Farmers. After a brief introduction with Thomas, we decided to host a workshop in Reykjavík in order to channel his vision and to inspire Icelandic farmers.

The workshop received media attention, and Matarauður hired a consultant to set up REKO in Iceland. In total, we set up six REKO rings. It has been challenging for some rural regions, while others are doing well. Although not all REKO rings have been successful, they have succeeded in changing the mindset of many farmers as they have illuminated perspectives and new opportunities. Selling directly brings farmers added financial value as well as more attention from consumers who increasingly like to buy directly from farmers or small-scale food producers.

As a result of working with REKO with

"REKO has given farmers an ego-boost, a new platform, and has initiated a change in the mindset."

BRYNJA LAXDAL

farmers all over Iceland, we initiated the foundation of an association of small-scale food producers (many farmers included) where the main goal is to protect their interests and capitalize on their opportunities to market and sell their products.

REKO has given farmers an ego-boost, a new platform, and has initiated a change in the mindset. ●

Greetings from REKO Down Under!

In February 2020, I heard a Diego Footer podcast in which Buddha Browett of Los Perros Urban Farm described a new direct and efficient sales model called REKO. Clever, I thought, but we don't need it here. Now I know I was wrong.

I HAVE AN intensive market garden growing salad mix and grass-fed beef on 30 hectares of owned and leased land just outside of Brisbane in Queensland, Australia. Most of my sales are directly to the consumer, but I also deliver salad and microgreens garnish to restaurants, cafes, and specialist inner-city grocers.

Our population density is sparse, most people own and drive cars, and our infrastructure doesn't encourage walking or cycling. Unfortunately, we have a dominant supermarket duopoly that our small local butchers and grocers find hard to compete with on price and convenience. We don't have a strong farmer's market tradition, as most produce is wholesaled to central markets to minimise high freight costs. But those supply chains failed as the public panicked due to COVID which, in turn, shook the faith of consumers who turned to gardening and connected with their local producers.

On the morning of March 23rd, 2020, my phone rang hot with texts and calls from both the restaurant and grocery mar-

ket streams to not only cancel orders but to double their farm gate pick-ups. Anticipating job losses, the grocers switched to cheap products. The production logistics of that were simple, I could simply add the garnishes to the salad, but distribution was another matter. Unfortunately, our local community stores also only carry cheap produce and I don't supply to them, so I had to find another way.

I remembered hearing about REKO and decided that we did need it here, after all. So, like many good things, REKO in Australia started with a glass of wine after a crazy day of orders, sales, and deliveries. We had the first pick-up in our local township the next weekend, and from there REKO has caught hold in Brisbane and its surrounding areas as well as down the coastline into New South Wales.

We currently have ten weekly REKO rings, with four more planned. I attend five: two on Tuesday evenings and three on Saturday mornings. To ensure the pick-ups are safe, most are drive-through, with customers lowering their car windows so

we can place their goodies in a cool box on the back seat and wave them on. Our customers love the drive-through because they still connect with their producers, but with less disruption to their day.

IT HAS BEEN interesting to watch how the customers decide what they want from REKO. With many start-ups fledgling during lockdown, we have approved most proposals and let the market decide. It didn't want wooden chopping boards and ceramics – although these crafts are beautiful and well supported in local shops, but people didn't want to buy them through REKO. They do want the same that we see in the Scandinavian groups: pastured meats and smallgoods, eggs, vegetables and fruit, mushrooms, kombucha, baked breads, sweet treats, prepared Keto meals, granola, dips, dog treats, cut and potted flowers, cheese, gin, wine, olive oil, honey, chocolate, beeswax deodorant – I am sure there are more.

We also love to support home gardeners with too much fruit or herbs, and especially if it is a child's enterprise. We have also supported enterprising chefs, who used local produce and sold prepared meals. Three courses with instructions to "use your best dinnerware" has been a great success and, in fact, we even had a REKO Christmas Dinner.

As many of the pick-ups are on public land, we have been required by our local government to insure for public liability. This was difficult for a Facebook group of farmers and producers to procure, but for

"We had the first pick-up in our local township the next weekend, and from there REKO has caught hold on Brisbane and its surrounding areas as well as down the coastline into New South Wales."

JACKI HINCHEY

Unfortunately many of us are members of the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance, a wonderful national organization that has helped out.

We also received a grant from a regional development authority to develop a digital marketing strategy, but we soon noticed that REKO's greatest asset is the organic growth that comes from excited and grateful consumers sharing photos of their haul. So, we have left them get on with that, and instead are building the REKO Australia website to coordinate all of the country's rings as well as provide guidance for vendors and group admins.

We have welcomed protein producers from as far as three hours' drive away, and as they use their experience in their first rings to start new ones in their own communities, the ripple effect will ensure a renaissance of shorter and stronger supply chains, and in turn create ever healthier ecosystems and communities. ●



 PÄIVI TÖYLI

National Food Sector Coordination Project



 CARMEN LEȘE

Farmer and co-founder of Poiana Galesa

Cooperation Spreads Knowledge

As REKO activities expanded and new rings were being started left and right, Thomas Snellman, Jonas Harald, and Ann-Sofi Ljungqvist contacted me in 2015 to suggest that it would be beneficial to organize a joint, national meeting for all administrators. The National Local Food Coordination Project was launched in the same year, and its role and activities perfectly supported the organization of such an event.

A **LARGE NETWORKING** event was organized in November 2015, attended by 26 REKO ring admins and developers from all over Finland. The discussions revealed that there was a need for general and open information about REKO rings and the model's operating principles, so that anyone considering setting up a ring could quickly find the necessary, basic information. The website Aitojamakuja.fi (True Flavours), founded in 2008 to support the local food sector's information efforts, has proven to be a good information distribution channel.

The website nowadays hosts its own REKO page in Finnish, Swedish, and English. It also later received a map showing the REKO rings' collection points as well as other relevant information. The website is continuously updated and complemented as needed. According to website tracking, the REKO page and map are in very active use: the REKO page was opened over 30,000 times in 2020 and the REKO map around 150,000 times (by March 2021).

In previous years, the University of Turku's Brahea Centre had promoted national development activities of small and medium-sized food companies especially in terms of the direct sales of foodstuff and small-scale, low-risk activities by informing producers about food-related legislative facilitations and their practical applications. The project convened a workgroup to discuss possible guidelines for REKO activities. This workgroup consisted of representatives from e.g. the Finnish Food Authority and the Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. The end result, REKO guidelines, were published in early 2016. Introducing REKO activities and enlightening and informing people about REKO-related issues are a highly suitable part of the communication work concerning national locally produced food.

Supporting REKO with the help of communication activities is a concrete form of cooperation and plays a significant part in the promotion of local food. ●

Struggle Turned into Success

In Romania, it all began with an idea in March 2020 when I saw Thomas Snellman's videos on YouTube. What if we replicated this kind of market in our town? I myself have a little hen farm and know some other producers – what if we organized and put this great idea into practice?

I BEGAN WITH looking for similar groups in my country. I found some young people in Brasov who were operating some kind of a food market. This gave me more faith that this kind of direct sales could be successful even in my town of Cluj-Napoca.

In November, I called my friend, Narcis Pinteș, who makes artisanal cheese. He was very excited about the idea and gave me all his support. I activated the Facebook group in March and began looking for more producers. In a few weeks, two food bloggers joined us, and we had our first REKO market on our national day, December 1st, 2020.

Time passed and Reko Cluj experienced real success, but it also faced some big challenges. We meet with our customers each week, two times a week. The group is growing beautifully and inspires other producers to join. The problems during these six months were all solved by our team, without whom I would not have managed. The bloggers decided to leave the project, and we added a new board team and became a board of five producers. Our goal is to cut out the intermediaries, to get the food from farm to fork, and to make REKO

the best market in town. After one week of success, our friends from Brasov said that they are the only ones that have the legal right to use the name REKO in our country and that we have to pay and cooperate – otherwise they would start their own market in Cluj and demand a fee from every producer. We said no. REKO is a free model and we wanted it to stay that way. After a lot of stress, we changed our name to ROA (the Romanian word for REKO) and continued our dream. Another big challenge was the sanitary authority. In Romania, you can trade only in special organized places, like traditional markets or malls.

The road has not been easy. I have been ready to give up a couple of times, but thanks to our board and the 21–25 producers in our team, everything has been resolved. Today, we have our own rules, Carta of ROA, and we choose our farmers based on the quality of their products and their commitment. We want to create a community with loyal customers and friendships. In order to do that, we gather around us people with the same values – good products, a smile, information, transparency and honesty. ●

THE FUTURE

REKO Conquers New Continents

REKO can currently be found on four continents and has two million members all over the world. New projects are underway, and Thomas Snellman continues to share his knowledge and expertise. But what does the future look like?

WHILST the number of rings continues to grow globally, development in Finland has stabilized. Interest in the movement has shown to fluctuate; sales occasionally go down only to later recover. Nowadays, there is also an ever-greater supply of locally produced food even in traditional grocery stores – a development that REKO has contributed to.

Another challenge lies in communication. At present, all REKO trades take place in closed Facebook groups, but how long can we count on Facebook retaining its popularity? And how can we reach new, younger customer groups? Thomas Snellman says that the system works as long as many people are active on Facebook, although another platform must eventually be created. Some actors are currently looking at various alternatives. There are plenty of logistics systems, but none that preserve the essence and soul of interaction as well as Facebook groups – not to mention that it would need to be free-of-charge and devoid of a third party. The social interaction between actors who have given a face to local food is crucial for REKO's popularity.

Despite challenges, REKO is here to stay – at least for as long as there is a demand for locally produced food. Jonas Harald compares the activities to a terrorist organization:

“From a purely organizational point of view, REKO functions as a terrorist group. It's a grassroots movement where the activities consist of many independent groups that share a common ideology but rarely have contact with each other. If you try to get rid of one group, another soon emerges. This means that the system is impossible to destroy. There have been several attempts to try to govern the activities, to set frameworks and limits, but they have all failed – everything revolves around supply and demand and a direct sales system that doesn't need a framework to function. At the same time, REKO is also the most brutal form of a free market economy. Just like everywhere else, REKO has also experienced cartel formations and overpriced, low-quality products. But these actors don't survive for particularly long.”

REKO has naturally not been spared from internal conflicts. The rings' admins have had differing views on how the concept should be developed. One conflict arose in the summer 2016 when a group of admins from Southern Finland attempted to govern which producers were allowed to join and which products were allowed to be sold via the rings. Moreover, they attempted to register the REKO trademark both nationally and internationally for their own gain. The majority of producers and consumers



reacted strongly towards this attempted coup. These rings no longer exist; instead, they have been replaced by new rings that function in accordance with the initial concept, where local admins have far-reaching self-determination. In the end, this conflict gave REKO a great deal of publicity which, in turn, strengthened the concept at national level. Looking back, Thomas Snellman is not surprised, but he states that it was not then – nor is it now – compatible with REKO's ideology to commercialize the activities or collect membership fees.

Jonas Harald tells that REKO has been of great significance to producers who, thanks to a functioning sales channel, have gained the courage to go all out with their enterprise. Cultivators have been able to broaden their selection and try out alternative crops on a small scale, and young and new producers have started up cultivations. Owing to REKO, there are also entrepreneurs who have started small-scale activities in the form of processing and craft food.

"REKO is one big testing laboratory and marketing school. Before REKO, it wasn't possible to try out alternative crops, to cultivate a couple of square meters of broccoli, or to cook a few dozen jars of jam. Thomas and I quickly realized that REKO had the potential to develop into a revolution within food handling, but eventually it became so much bigger than we ever could have expected. To a certain degree, the system has also managed to shake up structures within food retail, and an increasing amount of local produce has now found its way even to supermarkets."

Jonas Harald is fascinated by the concept's impact on producers. Those who were previously uncomfortable in public circumstances and barely wanted to talk about their products – let alone market them – are now the loudest of the bunch and proudly show off their harvest. Direct contact with customers has strengthened many producers' pride and self-confidence. Direct feedback gives the opportunity to develop products, innovate packagings, and discuss tastes and colours – a major



"REKO has been of great significance to producers who, thanks to a functioning sales channel, have gained the courage to go all out with their enterprise."

JONAS HARALD

change for producers who, up until then, had delivered their produce to large chains and had been repeatedly told that their produce were too small, too big, or too dirty.

At the same time as REKO continues to spread, an ongoing European development project attempts to create new contact platforms between producers and consumers and to find new delivery systems for local, sustainable food handling. In the spring 2021, Thomas Snellman was appointed as Finland's representative in the project's European Steering Committee. The project is administered in the country by VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland. Another development opportunity that Thomas Snellman believes in is using REKO to help women in developing countries' rural areas, primarily in Africa. He submitted an initiative regarding the issue to the European Commission in 2020.

The coronavirus pandemic has given REKO a boost and commerce in the Ostrobothnian rings has tripled compared to the previous year. Thomas Snellman was interviewed by the *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* newspaper in May 2020:

"I've received calls from all over the world. I predict that REKO will be huge in North America, where major, industrialized food chains have been hit hard by the coronavirus crisis. If lengthy crises affect the food supply, this is a system that allows small-scale food producers to find consumers in a simple way." ●

Dear REKO,

I want to write you a letter. This letter is not only a token of my love but also a wish of a shared future, yours and mine.

WHEN YOU rode into my life three years ago, I had only ever dreamt of someone like you. I knew that there were many like you in France and that you were hugely popular, but I never imagined that you would come to Finland. Nevertheless, you came and only spoke poor Swedish in the beginning and thought about settling in Ostrobothnia, apparently permanently.

Fortunately, we in the south also recognized your genius, and you came to visit us. In fact, I don't think there's anywhere in the country you haven't been to. Admirable swiftness! But of course, a wild, free, and clever thing such as yourself gets around.

You left admiring sighs and tender gazes in your wake, but you also apparently caused some envy and jealousy – as handsome Frenchmen often do. Some tried to pile rocks in your way and spread rumours about you that were less than flattering. They said you were careless and formed relationships with those that were not considered suitable for your reputation. Were you just a wastrel and a fraud?

We in the south knew your character, and we heard from Ostrobothnia that you truly were good-hearted and just, unlike the rumours claimed. You wanted to help create new contacts and also trusted that we would find the suitable partners on the path you led us on. Somehow, it felt right especially to us who had long worked together and sought easy and simple ways to act. We were known here, after all!

However, one romantic rival started saying that a Frenchman should not be cocky and put on airs, having so many flaws, crossed eyes, and a weird accent. The rival, who spoke fluent Finnish, didn't waste time. He began changing his name to a French-American one, gathered supporters around himself, and began building a castle – a castle that didn't let French-

men inside, and especially not crossed-eyed Frenchmen.

The rival spoke beautifully and created romantic dreams, making some people believe that romance carries to the grave. One's own thoughts, dialogue, and especially cooperation aren't needed if one has enough romance. When someone asked what this romance was, the rival told them that only stupid people would ask such questions! Everyone knows what romance is!

And so, some sentimental fools began chasing this notion of romance. The one and only, the true one, the one from whom you don't need to ask any questions and who doesn't ask any questions in return. Just takes what is his.

You, as a Frenchman, had believed that you also knew romance, just like you knew dialogue and cooperation. So believed those who had gotten to know you. In fact, your language of romance turned out to be much more complex and intricate than the rival's. Romance was, in truth, part of your nature, albeit in a so self-evident manner that the rival didn't understand it.

Some naturally believed they could take advantage of you, but these kinds of sycophants gradually vanished. You settled in our Finland and trusted that everyone could communicate, trust, and love just like you. And if there were some who could not yet do so, they would learn once given the chance. We don't know your current whereabouts, but the last we heard, you had retired to the peace of the countryside to keep an eye on the situation and send encouraging messages to the friends of genuineness you met along the way. You wanted to continue trusting in fairness and that there is space for you in Finland; in a country where bureaucracy from the tsarist rule has stamped itself so hard on people's foreheads that washing it off seems close to impossible. But you know that romance cannot be achieved through bureaucracy, only through love.

With love, your Producer

• Thomas Snellman received this letter from a producer during the attempted coup in 2016.

THOMAS SNELLMAN

“My Duty to Step Up”

We started REKO in order to create a way to bring producers and consumers together in our region – never imagining that it would spread all over the world.

WHEN THE SYSTEM that would become REKO took hold of me, I only saw success in the future. And it did become a success story in the end, but I must admit that it was all in danger of crumbling down in the summer 2014. At least in Jakobstad, business was so slow that I feared producers would give up. A miracle happened when school began in August: the movement experienced a powerful boost, while interest in the concept began to grow in various places throughout Finland. And then things really started to take off.

When I was contacted by people from all over the world, I could have chosen not to act. But my own background as a small producer with all the related problems impelled me to do my best to help my professional brothers and sisters. I saw it as my duty to step up if a small actor somewhere in the world needed my contribution.

I have been repeatedly encouraged to write down the story of REKO during the years. How did this local initiative first spread in Finland, then to the Nordic countries, and now all over large parts of the world? REKO's success depended on multiple factors. Although this publication largely focuses on a few key persons, there are actually numerous heroes in REKO's story: all the local admins around the world who have taken on the concept and simul-

taneously contributed to the success story. I want to thank all who have joined this journey. The media has also played an important part. REKO has been brought up in the media as a grassroots movement's fight for its survival – small producers and consumers against the powerful national and global food industry. Ostrobothnian newspapers published a large article about REKO in the summer 2016. The title of this article was the most emotional I've ever experienced: “He Gave REKO To The People”. Media visibility has been invaluable in spreading knowledge on how the system works.

I've had the privilege to exchange thoughts and opinions with food activists and small producers around the world. I've cried tears of joy numerous times when I've heard what my initiative has meant for a small, individual actor. This joy is the greatest recognition for my contribution.

I feel that I'm part of a REKO family – not just locally in one ring but also nationally and internationally. Local networks have also contributed to new forms of cooperation. Producers who have cultivated and produced foodstuff in their loneliness have suddenly gained colleagues, and there are almost only winners in this movement. If you want to describe REKO with one word, I suggest joy. Fly, REKO, fly, as far as your wings carry! ●



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 - In addition, contributions from 15 REKO admins and key persons from all over the world







"The concept is simple
– to provide consumers
with fresh local ingredients,
without middlemen."

THOMAS SNELLMAN

Founder of REKO

REKO

FAIR CONSUMPTION SINCE 2013