

Café Bhoch3 and Julia

“Sustainability” Insights from a Plant-Based Café

ELLA HARNISCH AND KIMIA KARBALAEI MOHAMMAD-HOSSEIN IN CONVERSATION WITH JULIA GRÖNINGER

Our interview partner Julia is the co-owner of *Bhoch3*, a plant-based café in Basel that she has operated with her partner for the past two and a half years. Notably, its excellent reviews on Google Maps show that the café is extremely popular and successful. Julia’s reflections offer valuable insights into how small business owners, particularly in the Global North, conceptualize sustainability in their everyday practices. More specifically, it represents a business that is particularly concerned with promoting plant-based food, with an underlying vision for sustainability. Julia’s approach is notably centered around the idea of sustainability as an individual “lifestyle” choice rather than a structural or systemic issue. As such, her vision aligns with a broader consumer-based model of sustainability, where change is enacted primarily through personal choices rather than collective political engagement or institutional transformation.

In the interview, Julia identifies overconsumption as the core problem of the present climate and ecological crisis. She is frustrated with these consumption habits that according to her stem from a lack of education and information. Without going into detail, she suggests helping people to make “better” choices through more information. Further, she suggests that a sustainable future must involve more intentional, limited, and diversified dietary practices. Crucially, she promotes the idea of diversifying dietary options, emphasizing that everyone should have the freedom to choose their preferred way of eating—whether plant-based, gluten-free, or otherwise. Notably, Julia seemingly does not differentiate between these diets although they differ in their relevance for sustainability. This ideal is also reflected on the café’s website, which states that Bhoch3 aims to “consult, not moralize” customers (baristabarbasel.ch). This statement

is reflective of Julia’s overall conviction that seeks to make a strong convincing offer to customers and disagrees with deciding on anyone’s most sustainable diet.

However, Julia’s emphasis on consumer choice as the primary vehicle for sustainability reflects a commonly held but problematic assumption, namely that all individuals have equal ability to choose what they consume. This assumption overlooks the reality that many people, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, do not have the ability to choose sustainable diets. Time, financial resources, education, and even access to information about climate issues all play a role in shaping consumption habits. Framing sustainability purely in terms of consumer behavior risks ignoring these deeper structural inequalities (e.g. Sultana 2022). In line with a neoliberal logic, it also sees individuals as determining the state of the climate crisis, and action against it, instead of acknowledging the overwhelming impact of larger systemic drivers, such as the fossil fuel industry or the exploitation of workers further down the value chain. This is precisely what distinguishes a “sustainability” lens from a “climate justice” one. The latter “is about paying attention to how climate change impacts people differently, unevenly, and disproportionately, as well as redressing the resultant injustices in fair and equitable ways” (Sultana 2022, 118). Ultimately, it also wrongly assumes that all expensive food is “sustainable”.

Julia’s opinions on buying coffee with plant-based milk today showcase her rather privileged perspective. Drawing from personal experience, she criticizes that cafés and restaurants often charge extra for plant-based milk. She sees this not only as unfair to people following a plant-based diet but also as a broader example of

how sustainability is often penalized rather than incentivized. It seems like it poses a fundamentally important problem in the quest for sustainability for Julia. Her focus fails to recognize that for many, even the regular price of a coffee may be unaffordable. It might be more conclusive to consider that sustainable products *generally* remain economically inaccessible to large segments of the population. While for Julia and people in similar positions, the price for milk is the hindrance (although they might still be able to afford it), others fundamentally cannot buy “sustainable” products. These peoples’ perspective is missing from Julia’s observations.

Her notion of “ethical meat consumption” further illustrates the limits of her perspective. She traces this idea back to the normal diet of people in Switzerland three generations ago. Back then, according to Julia, people only ate meat once a week. She argues that this should inspire a shift in diet today. Most importantly, numerous studies suggest meat consumption should be restricted more radically to tackle the climate crisis (Newell et al, 2021). After all, the state of the climate has changed dramatically from the time Julia describes to the present. Further, her vision for ethical meat consumption again implies a level of autonomy and control over their diet that not all people have. It fails to acknowledge how meat consumption is shaped by cultural, social, and economic factors beyond individual choice. Again, Julia’s reflections are shaped by notions rooted in personal responsibility.

This tension becomes particularly visible when the conversation turns to coffee, one of the most globally traded commodities and a product deeply entangled in exploitative value chains and extraordinarily vulnerable to the climate crisis’ impact (Grabs et al. 2025). Given that coffee was a key theme in the third colloquium block, we asked Julia directly how she navigates its problematic dimensions within her business. We also confronted her with activist Alexandra Galivano’s suggestion that people should consider giving up coffee entirely due to its environmental and ethical costs. Unsurprisingly, Julia dismissed this possibility, arguing that coffee is so essential to people that they will doubtless never give it up and implying that coffee is a non-negotiable offering in her café.

In Julia’s framing, buying organic, expensive coffee is a proxy for ethical behavior, whereas cheap coffee—like that sold at Basel’s train station for one franc—is automatically seen as unsustainable and morally questionable. This creates a binary that not only oversimplifies the complexities of sustainable food systems but also ignores economic differences. It suggests that people with lower incomes are

inherently making “bad” choices simply because they cannot afford to buy better ones. In turn, more expensive food is understood as inherently “better”.

For Julia, eliminating coffee is not an option and seemingly also not something she desires. Among other factors, she also likes drinking coffee herself and is appreciative of good-tasting coffee. Instead, she attempts to reduce its harm by sourcing organic beans from small roasteries whom she then trusts with shouldering the responsibility for an ethical product. However, she also admits that taste is her number one priority when selecting coffee. This admission is significant since it makes clear that Julia is after all running a business and even though it is built on ethical and sustainable principles, offering a product that tastes good and is thus bought by customers is the most important concern. Julia does not view it as her responsibility to research the labor conditions or environmental impacts of her supply chain further. In this way, she shares a tendency with arguably most Global North consumers and businesses: A sense of detachment from global value chains, what Hochachka (2023) calls the “central nervous system” of the world economy. This is especially true for parts of the chain that are indeed geographically distant and also *feel* far away.

We also find noteworthy that Julia and her café are not connected with other similar businesses or places that in some fashion fight for “sustainability” if not climate justice. She seemed to be frustrated with this circumstance as well. She especially highlighted that the city of Basel has never supported her café in its special promotion of plant-based food. She only very rarely participates in local initiatives such as *Basel Vegan* which is a coupon initiative. This could be an opportunity for climate justice activists and initiatives to intervene and connect similar businesses amongst one another.

To conclude, the findings from our interview with Jana give insight into the potential and limitations of one sustainable small business in Switzerland in the Global North. On the one hand, *Bhoch3* provides accessible alternatives to conventional food options and contributes to a more diverse range of diets in Basel. On the other hand, her vision remains largely rooted in individual agency, consumer behavior, and market solutions. It does not adequately account for the structural inequalities that shape who can participate in “sustainable” practices, and it excludes more conclusive, systemic perspectives on the global economy and its role in climate injustice. Thus, the interview with Julia offers a critical lens through which to consider the contradictions of “ethical” or “sustainable” consumption in the Global North. Our interview

with her raises questions about the impact a business operating in a capitalist system can actually have. Further, it points to the role of privilege and structural inequalities like class in the struggle for what “sustainability” means and how a societal effort towards a “greener” future should look like: Should everyone shoulder the same responsibilities?

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