
Food Heritage and Nationalism in Europe

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Chapter 12

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Careful with heritage

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Observe, describe, don't freeze

At the beginning of the long 19th century, heritage belonged essentially to the cultural sphere. It was no different for food heritage. Intellectuals, historians and folklorists made large use of it with the aim of “awakening” the national consciousness – as the phrase went. They used it as part of the nation–state discourse (Berger and Conrad 2014). Such rhetoric powerfully conveyed a strong feeling of inclusion within the nation, well described as *wir Gefühl* (the “us” feeling) by Norbert Elias. But it also implied *othering* and the exclusion of “aliens”.

Food and taste, more than other elements of the imagined community of the nation (Anderson 1983), convey the feeling of “home”, embody sensorial memories imbued with nostalgia and nurture the feeling of belonging together. Thanks to its nature, rooted in culture as much as in the *zoe* – mere everyday life – food has proved extremely successful in linking the idea of the *Kulturnation* to its daily domestic experience, thus indirectly supporting the interpretation of the nation as a family, sometimes even in the ethnic sense.

As Paolo Capuzzo suggests here (Chapter 4), since the beginning of industrialization – which obviously took place at different times in different countries – and even more so in the age of globalization, food heritage has rapidly shifted towards commodity: it has turned into *commodity heritage* – artefacts modified in order to enter the global market (Grasseni 2005). More: they have become “a political artefact, on its way to becoming a tourist artefact” (Mintz 2003, 26).

Both UNESCO's nominations to world intangible heritage and the EU's quality place-based labelling, created in their different ways as means of protecting culinary diversity and authenticity, have generated risks, as Laura Di Fiore (Chapter 2) and Fabio Parasecoli (Chapter 3) point out in this book. Thus, cuisine heritage has turned into a truly contested issue which has even fuelled food wars, especially where ethnic, national or political conflicts have existed, as discussed in the introduction.

Gisela Welz reflects on the case of two products. Lokoumi Geroskipou, linked with the firm Aphrodite's Delight based in the Greek part of

Cyprus, was in 2007 entered in the European Union Registry of Protected Geographical Indications. Thus, this sweet became strictly connected to Cyprus. Welz also focuses on *halloumi* cheese, which was not entered in the protected denomination list, but was strongly promoted once again by the Republic of Cyprus shortly after it joined the European Union (Welz 2013). The German anthropologist highlights the contested origins behind those two stories, the first a successful and the second an unsuccessful one, as well as the bitter criticisms that they aroused. In fact, the same candy under the name of *lokum* or *Turkish delight* is not only produced in the Republic of Cyprus, but also in the still internationally unrecognized Turkish part of the island, and of course in Turkey itself, but also Armenia and Iran. Moreover, this delight, in different versions, was manufactured and widely consumed throughout the Ottoman Empire.

The case of *halloumi* is similar and yet different, since it was produced not only in various places, originally by extremely small groups of women, and was made out of cow, sheep or goat milk. The cheese, though bearing the same name, tastes different according to the kind of milk used or the season or the herbs eaten by the animals whose milk is used. In both cases, however, application for a quality label resulted in a remarkable hardening of the products. Standardization prevailed over variety, singleness over plurality of tastes, maintenance of exactly the same qualities over flexibility. In short, the immobility of a supposedly authentic place of production prevailed over changes in time. What got lost was the living wealth of hybridization and exchange embodied in these foods, as in almost every cuisine, as Massimo Montanari (Chapter 7), Özge Samancı (Chapter 9) and Catherine Horel (Chapter 8) have highlighted here, referring respectively to Europe of the Middle Ages and the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires.

Inventories and forms of protection are a useful way of controlling the quality of food and avoiding confusion between industrial dishes prepared with artificial flavours or colours and food properly prepared with good ingredients. However, labelling and bureaucracy tend to freeze one set definition and recipe. Ignoring or at least downplaying the plurality of its various versions and the multiplicity of places and larger or smaller communities which contributed to creating such a dish, they end up in favour of strict, homogeneous, codified canons. Instead of choosing this way, one should surely set gastronationalism aside and perhaps follow the new path of ecogastronomy (Goodman, Dupuis and Goodman 2012).

The chefs' way

Food nationalism seems to grow stronger as a result of the European Union's recent difficulties. As an extreme example one could quote the words of UK Environment Secretary Michael Gove who, in late 2017, stigmatized an

“unpatriotic attitude towards cheese” in the face of concerns about tariffs on cheese imported to the United Kingdom after Brexit, as if British citizens should consume British cheese and eschew foreign cheese as a matter of patriotism.¹ It is therefore important to reflect once more on the concepts of authenticity and of food heritage in their connections with nationalism, and to suggest a more flexible idea of heritage which can reflect the food differences and the nuances within Europe.

In a short paper written in 1986 when he was a fellow of the Palo Alto Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences and meanwhile acting as a reviewer of the restaurant scene in the San Francisco area, Arjun Appadurai discussed the authority of gastronomic standards. A well-known postcolonial intellectual as well as the author of a major early contribution, *Gastropolitics in Hindu South Asia* (Appadurai 1986), he asked questions about immanent norms and authorities. Among other agencies, he quoted restaurants and professional cooks:

Authenticity as a criterion seems always to emerge just after its subject matter has been significantly transformed. How is one to generate stable criteria of authenticity for traditions that are always changing? All cuisines have a history: tastes shift, regional distinctions go in and out of focus, new techniques and technologies appear. New foods come in and go out of vogue in all complex culinary traditions. The idea of authenticity seems to imply a timeless perspective on profoundly historical processes. Thus, the transhistorical ring of authority with which the word authenticity is sometimes used in the evaluation of foreign cuisines is spurious.

(Appadurai 1986: 25)

Restaurants and cooks are present in the introduction as well as in the chapters authored by Katya Knyazeva (Chapter 11), Catherine Horel (Chapter 8) and Jean-Pierre Williot (Chapter 10). Now is perhaps the moment to briefly focus on chefs, and point out the role they are having, and that some of them already had: to be sure, a very important one when it comes to defining, criticizing and creating standards.

Ironically, on the global scene, it is some of the most important Michelin-starred chefs who have voiced the need for closer attention to variety, *terroir* and respect for sustainability. In spite of the fact that they are de facto producing food for a tiny community of very well-off consumers, these worldwide stars for a global public put forward issues previously claimed by slow food or countercultures, as Marica Tolomelli points out in this volume (Chapter 5).

If Alice Waters was one of the first to call for a profound trend change in cuisine, most creative innovators in the field of gastronomy now focus their sights on the local. While hundreds of thousands of pigs on large industrial farms recently bought by the Chinese are fed with soy produced in intensive monocultures in South America and their meat is sent to other

continents for the tables of mass consumers, the chefs look for small farms and ancient breeds of cattle, praise sustainability and claim to serve their clients dishes made of the entire animal, including the supposedly “poorer parts” like head or tail. It is the great chefs who look at the traditional species of fruit trees and plants that were about to disappear because their yield was considered too low. Corrado Assenza, who took over the small family enterprise of sweets and pastries, a true *laboratorio artigiano* (a true artisan’s workshop) in Noto, Sicily, has chosen to utilize only the ancient and local species of almonds. By using them in his preparations, he made them interesting for farmers, who were at this point sure to find a market for their once-neglected product. Thus he saved the Sicilian almonds, now named after the city of Avola, from disappearing, and had a direct impact on a landscape which is per se heritage.²

Thai chef Bo Sangrisava revolted against a uniform fake Thai food being imposed on the global market. She wanted to show Thai people that they could be proud of their food and rise above the global trivialization of their cuisine. She started looking for special original ingredients at risk of disappearing. Likewise, Peruvian chef Virgilio Martínez declared that he wanted to represent the entire country in all its landscapes and altitudes, and has been searching for new ingredients which he presents together with stones, rocks, musk from the Andes or the Peruvian seaside: the essential elements of the bio- and landscape. The same goes for chef René Redzepi, of Balkan origin but now active in Copenhagen as the owner and creative mind behind Noma, four times voted the best restaurant in the world. He also wants to propose the “real Danish landscape” with its culture, game and forests.

This interest in the landscape and the soil recalls early 19th-century nationalism and its focus on the same features: the *Boden* – the soil – was one of the two elements in the successful German nationalist expression *Blut und Boden* (blood and soil) which summed up the German *Volk* for so many years in common parlance as well as in museums featuring the nation and its landscape. Now, in a quite different context, and speaking to a different public, these chefs search for the *terroir*, the soil itself, only they reverse the significance: they no longer connect it with the *Volk* but with a human landscape to protect and cherish, and with the crucial issue of sustainability.

Musa Dağdeviren, creator of the quarterly *Yemek ve Kültür* (*Food and Culture*) as well as owner and soul of the restaurant *Çiya* in Istanbul, who also figures in the same Netflix series *Chef’s Table* as the aforementioned chefs, wisely declared: “When you define food in ethnic terms, it sets communities against each other and can create a serious alienation and extinction of our food culture”. Dağdeviren has carefully avoided isolating national elements, highlighting shared histories and mutual influences instead.³

Food heritage can be a terrible hardener of borders. However, if the discourse is properly deconstructed, and all its coexisting movements, grafting, exchanges and negotiations are laid bare, it can also make those borders more porous and tell shared histories instead of divisive ones.

Respecting differences: the Artusi model

Let us now go back to the 19th century in order to reread and reinterpret the lesson of a great gastronome in post-unification Italy: Pellegrino Artusi.

This classic example from the history of Italian cuisine suggests it is possible to keep track of and indirectly safeguard a flexible gastronomic heritage based more on a bottom-up movement than on a top-down regulation. Artusi (Montanari 2012, 8) was the first to make an inventory of local cuisines and create a national language for Italian gastronomy. He composed his work from recipes he came across or that reached him from many parts of the country. It was largely women who wrote to him to correct or complete his recipe book and suggest new dishes. In this collective way, albeit filtered by Artusi's commanding personality, the first recipe book of united Italy was compiled: *La scienza in cucina e l'arte di mangiar bene* (*Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well*) (1891). It was to be updated and added to repeatedly, running to 15 editions by 1911.

It may not be the only example of a bottom-up syncretically compiled national recipe book, or of a common feeling of belonging being created upon a varied cuisine that became a shared possession thanks to a recipe book. In this Artusi's method might perhaps be compared to Appadurai's study of the Indian situation (Appadurai 1986).

When it comes to what we might call the European culinary heritage, our attitude must be critical and prudent. We are well aware that UNESCO cares about an intangible heritage which should be not only traditional, but also "contemporary and living at the same time".⁴ UNESCO pays attention to "living practices", and has seen the risk that "freezing practices" may prove "aberrant" (Bortolotto 2013, 65). However, every process of construction of a canon and a list may contain a risk of "freezing". The solution proposed by Artusi went in the right direction: faced with a host of local traditions, he chose not to *codify* the recipes (that is, to find out the "right" way to perform them) or to propose them as "national" and valid for everyone, but simply to *recount* the recipes he found interesting. He put them in a network and shared the know-how, but respected the differences. We feel that such an approach – typical of Pellegrino Artusi but also more generally of Italian gastronomic culture – might serve as a model for displaying the European food heritage. The line we suggest in concluding this book is thus to refrain from encasing a gastronomic heritage in rules: in other words, not to codify or museify it.

Focusing on time and not on space

It also appears important not to enclose that heritage within predefined territorial borders stressing the *spatial dimension* so beloved of our times. Witnessing the predominantly geographic sense we nowadays attach to the notion of origins tends to immobilize knowledge inside artificial boundaries. It would surely be more important to focus on the *time dimension*, which keeps things alive and on the move.

In charting and respecting differences as an intrinsic value, taking a leaf out of Artusi's book, our acclaim goes not to an unchanging reality but to the value of a heritage that is not laid down once and for all but is in constant evolution thanks to the crossed influences that history provides.

The crucial, and politically important, issue is what line to take on "tradition". All traditions are no doubt subject to change, so had we not better leave them free to unfold creatively, instead of fossilizing them or letting them slide into an at times unstoppable decline (Nas 2002, 140)?

As for the specific angle that interests us here – heritage – we may draw some advice from the example of a practice that was in danger of extinction: Javanese shadow theatre. In the 1980s it had touched rock bottom but was saved, not because it became an object for protection, but because it managed to transform itself. It transcended codified tradition by resorting to new musical instruments and breaking rules that had become over-rigid and dated. A typical place-related art form was saved by transforming itself quite without inventing a top-down tradition. It would pay us to observe and learn and not define rigid standards from above.

Inventories created from below, being less rigid and prescriptive, may enhance the perception of food as an immaterial heritage that is decisive for collective identity, but also syncretistic, elastic, mobile and open to exchange, happenstance and alteration. Perhaps this road is better than the political way of certifying (Clough 2015), which anchors the gastronomic heritage to fixed identities, "cultures" dangerously bound up with ethnic belonging which itself is seen as static and not – as is the case – the upshot of constantly changing events and stories. The doubt is whether heritage conservation in a museum framework may actually be breeding new intolerance and new nationalism, perhaps under a different name. That is why we think it so important to steer all discussion of origins, traditions and heritage onto a time and not space dimension, history not geography.

Notes

- 1 www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-42427812 accessed 28 February 2019.
- 2 Ironically, the consortium of the Avola almonds is awaiting the IGP from Brussels. See www.ConsorzioMandorlaAvola.it accessed 28 February 2019.
- 3 www.eater.com/2018/9/28/17888274/chefs-table-musa-dagdeviren-season-5-episode-2 accessed 28 February 2019.
- 4 <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> accessed 28 February 2019.

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