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# Food and Authenticity: Five Cases

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## **Food and Authenticity: Five Cases**

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Authenticity, defined as the discovery or revelation of origin or essence, is a primary value orientation in modern society, and the consumption of food and drink is one of the most potent modes for seeking and affirming personal and national authenticity. This paper compares cases from Belize, Italy, India, France, and the international Slow Foods movement to illustrate the intertwining of history and economy, state and culture, in the production and consumption of what are believed to be authentic foods. Particular attention is paid to the moral force of diet, and to the manner in which global and local forces intersect to constitute authentic foodstuffs

[keywords: authenticity, food, morality, globalization, nationalism]

This essay is part of a larger project on the cross-cultural forms taken in the search for authenticity, which I take to be a socially constructed compensatory value developed in response to the evolution of individualism and pluralism in an increasingly anomic modern world. I assume that authenticity is sought in the rediscovery of origins or in the recovery and expression of essence. My interest here is not to debunk the quest for authenticity as an illusion, nor to show that it is an epiphenomenon reflecting deeper causes, but to reveal and compare the patterns that the search for authenticity takes under various circumstances. In this short paper I will outline

## Food and Authenticity

five cases where personal and national authenticity has been sought in the consumption of food and drink.

Obviously, comestibles are never merely fuels for the body; they are always potent symbolic resources (for examples see the essays in Counihan and Van Esterik 1997). What we consume plays a large part in how we define ourselves and how others view us. Diet accomplishes the cultural task of constructing identity in a particularly powerful way, since consumption reminds us of our home, family, and friends while simultaneously providing intense sensual satisfaction. Status too is marked by the intake of specialty foods and drinks that are costly and rare. In the experience of eating and drinking taste, smell and texture are always intertwined with aesthetics, memory, intimacy, and power.

The symbolic force of consumption is enhanced by the fact that, like dance or music, cookery too is culturally organized and historically constructed into distinctive regional and local patterns. Although combinations of food and drink are infinitely malleable in theory, the grammar of a particular ethnic or regional cuisine constitutes what can actually be ingested, much as a language limits the range of sounds that can be heard or spoken. For example, most Americans are repulsed by French cheeses that are smelly and runny, while the French find American preferences for plastic wrapped individual slices of refrigerated orange cheddar incomprehensible. Scandinavians love to eat pickled herring for breakfast; for Americans this is unheard of. People in the United States keep their meat, potatoes and vegetables separate on a plate and serve food in a sequence; South Asians like to mix their foods together in a mush while Koreans put all their dishes out simultaneously. And so on, ad infinitum. The power of these cultural practices cannot be underestimated. For example, according to Jared Diamond, in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century Norse colonists in Greenland starved to death in large measure because they refused to eat the fish that proliferated in the waters around their settlements. For them, civilized human beings ate meat; only the savage native Inuits ate fish. When the ecology failed to support their cattle, the settlers died rather than break their food taboos (Diamond 2004).

Everyday culinary grammars are unremarked when life is lived within a cohesive traditional culture, where there are few comparisons to be made. But when people migrate and face assimilation in a foreign country food then can become an emotionally powerful reminder of

## Food and Authenticity

the lost homeland, and a source of connection to one's roots – a central aspect of the modern quest for authenticity. In the United States, for example, even the most integrated Americans nostalgically celebrate their distant ethnic heritages by preparing what they believe to be holiday foods originally 'from the old country' – which in fact may not be distinguishable from the holiday foods eaten by their equally American neighbors to commemorate their own mythic and nearly forgotten origins (Waters 1990). The declaration of an authentic identity by consumption of food and drink that is thought to be characteristic of one's ethnic, racial or national group takes on even more powerful symbolism in cases of internal stratification. Then consumption may not only be a mark of intimacy or an expression of difference, it can also be a potent reminder of collective unity and of resistance against the dominant culture. For example, among African-Americans collard greens, red beans, rice, and chitlins (innards) are not just ordinary foods; in this community, they symbolize the history of the race; the food of slaves that is now eaten as a point of pride.

However, maintaining (or even imagining) a diet that can be considered to be the original fare of one's ancestors has become ever more complex in an interconnected modern world where flux is the norm. Previously, immigrants were obliged to adapt to the food available in their new environments. but it was assumed that consumption practices in the homeland remained relatively constant. South Asians immigrants in the United States might be reduced to eating Uncle Ben's rice at home and watching in dismay while their children gobbled French fries at a fast food restaurant, but they could find solace recalling the Bismati rice and curry of their natal village. In a global capitalist economy such stability may no longer be the case. American-based giants such as McDonalds and Pizza Hut appear on street corners from Algeria to Zambia, while Coke and Pepsi battle one another for the opportunity to quench thirsts world-wide. More and more the new generation in the homeland is just as likely to be eating a Big Mac as any 'traditional' food (Ritzer 1996).<sup>1</sup> Even regionally, within the United States, national brands have tended to crush small-scale producers due to economies of scale, mass-market advertising and the demise of the mom and pop grocery store. These incursions of major corporations into local consumption practices have led to considerable hand wringing about the loss of authentic local tradition and a worldwide homogenization of taste in a global marketplace.

## Food and Authenticity

Yet the opposite effect also occurs; the invention of an authentic national cuisine can develop in a direct response to the globalizing process. The appearance of ‘real Belizean food’ (traced brilliantly in Wilk 1993, 1999) is a case in point. Belize, formerly British Honduras, is a Central American/Caribbean nation of 200,000 people that gained its independence from England in 1981. Once known primarily as a logging colony, and now as a tourist destination, it is inhabited by a Creole population of mixed European, African and American Indian ancestry. Spanish-speaking migrants from the neighboring countries enter into the stew, and there are numerous other ethnic groups resident as well, including Mayan Indians, South Asians, and Chinese. These ethnic divisions are cross-cut by class differences and kinship ties, though the elite are mostly white or Creole. Regardless of class, Belizeans are remarkably well-traveled. At least 30% of the population resides in the United States, and Los Angeles is the second-largest Belizean city. 73% of adult Belizeans have been abroad, 34% have lived outside the country for more than three months. Belize also plays host to a huge number of tourists every year (140,000), and has been heavily influenced by television, videos and other cultural imports from the United States and elsewhere in the Caribbean. In sum, Belize is a country that has found itself completely enmeshed in the global marketplace. However, instead of Belizean eating habits becoming more homogenous and international, the reverse has occurred. Although Coke and McDonalds are certainly popular, self-proclaimed Belizean Restaurants are now proudly advertising “authentic Belizean dishes – Garnachas, Tamales, Rice and Beans, Stew Chicken, Fried Chicken” (quoted in Wilk 1999: 246); an eclectic mixture that reflects the hybrid character of the population as a whole.

The notion that certain local dishes are desirable because they are authentic is a very recent phenomenon in Belize. Previously, during the colonial era, the Belizean upper classes purchased European imports as a way of affirming their elite status positions. Seeing themselves as cosmopolitan sophisticates, when they did eat local products they prepared them following European recipes and used imported ingredients. Upwardly striving middle class consumers tried to distinguish themselves from the poor - who ate whatever they could grow or catch - by emulating elite tastes, but at a lower level of expense; feast food for them was imported corned beef, white bread, and tinned sardines. The connection between consumption and status led to

## Food and Authenticity

some oddities. For example, lobster was eaten by the wealthy who prepared it in European style as a luxury; it was eaten by the poor because it was cheap; the middle class despised lobster as disgusting trash and would not allow it in the house. 2

Food in the pre-independence era was primarily an internal symbolic boundary marker, dividing the classes in Belize from one another in a relatively stable hierarchy of taste with the elite as the sole arbiters of what was or was not a proper diet. 3 Some variation was added when the Belizean middle class consumed 'Spanish' dishes from the north as a "safely exotic option – associated neither with the class below nor the class above" (Wilk 1999: 249). During the colonial period, there was no unifying authentic Belizean national cuisine and no concept of one. This began to change when Britain granted Belize a degree of local autonomy and the new national government made efforts to promote the consumption of local fish and other produce. At first this initiative was met with strong opposition. Middle class Belizeans were repelled at the thought of eating 'bush food' instead of the imported tinned sardines, soft drinks and wheat bread to which they had grown accustomed and which they associated with a higher status and a coveted international identity.

This changed after the visit of Queen Elizabeth in 1985, the first time a British monarch had ever come to the ex-colony. At a state dinner, the queen was served a roasted gibnut, which is a wild guinea-pig-like rodent much prized as food by the rural poor but not generally eaten by the urban middle classes. The Queen, who has eaten many odd dishes in her travels, made no protest at her unusual main course (though she didn't eat much of it). But the British tabloids, sensing a scandal, "produced a slew of outraged headlines, variations on the theme of 'Queen Served Rat by Wogs'" (Wilk 1999: 251). The irate press reports emanating from their former colonizers stimulated a reaction among Belizeans who proudly defended the previously despised gibnut as a tasty national treasure. Ever since, it has regularly been served in restaurants under the name of 'Royal Rat' and has become so popular that it is in real danger of being hunted to extinction. Although unfortunate for the gibnut, this was the beginning of the Belizean rediscovery (or invention) of a distinctive national cuisine.

The Queen's visit was a catalytic event, since it occurred just as the newly independent Belize was searching for appropriate symbols to mark itself off as a unique nation. In a sense

## Food and Authenticity

then, the new taste for the Royal Rat and the development of an authentic Belizean cuisine are expressions of a nascent state's growing need to differentiate itself from its neighbors and so inculcate loyalty in the populace, serving much the same purpose as the new flag, the nation's new name, the national anthem, and state sponsorship of folk music and folk dance. But there is more to it. The appearance of real Belizean food also occurred in the context of a massive influx of tourists, who did not come to Belize in order to eat meals of tinned sardines and Seven-up. From them, Belizeans became conscious that an authentic local cuisine and culture was expected and valued by the visitors whose respect and dollars they craved. Furthermore, as a result of equally massive out-migration combined with a pervasive media invasion from abroad, Belizeans became more discriminating and savvy consumers, no longer unduly impressed by the mere existence of imported goods from the metropole. They also became aware of, and proud of, the specificity of their own foods and cultural production.

As a result of these factors, the old binary colonialist divide between inferior backward local goods and superior modern foreign goods began to erode, as did internal hierarchical distinctions of class-bound taste. In the new post-colonial world of the nation-state, all Belizeans, whatever their status, class, or ethnicity, have become aware of the necessity of defending (and sometimes inventing) their own local culture, which is now understood to be under siege, whereas previously it was not even known to exist. As Wilk puts it, "everyone in Belize is now concerned with foreign influence, local authenticity, and the interpretation of various kinds of domination and resistance" (Wilk 199: 249).<sup>4</sup> In response, a taste for a recently discovered Belizean national cuisine has grown up in the shade of McDonalds' Golden Arches.

### **Varieties of Authentic Cuisine: Pasta, Curry and Bordeaux**

The connection between the invention/recovery of an authentic national cuisine and the development of national consciousness is to be found not only in tiny and remote Belize, but also in many other much larger societies where national identity has been problematic. Italy is a case in point. The Italian state only came into existence in 1860, and it maintains a relatively feeble hold on its citizens in a social formation that favors familial ties over civic duties (for an analysis, see Putnam 1993). After the formation of the Italian state, people continued to speak their varied local dialects and to identify themselves as Piedmontese, Neapolitans, and Milanese first, Italians

## Food and Authenticity

second. To this day, even small villages have preserved powerful feelings of their own distinct identities. It is not surprising then that strong regional independence movements such as the Northern League continue to challenge Italian unity.

In these circumstances, food, and especially pasta, has been one of the few things that Italians feel they share and that mark them as a specific people. The identification of true Italianness with pasta is not ancient, but is largely a result of the huge outpouring of poor Italian immigrants in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In a foreign setting, these workers were identified as, and began to identify themselves as, pasta eaters in lieu of other obvious national markers. The connection between being Italian and eating pasta was then carried back to the home country by returnees (La Cecla, 1998: 53-4, cited in Castellanos and Bergstresser 2004). Pasta is a uniquely apt symbol for the fragmented Italian nation, since it is manufactured in a seemingly infinite number of shapes, sizes, textures, consistencies, is prepared with a huge range of sauces, and cooked and served in many different ways. Each combination is rigidly codified and reckoned to be characteristic of a region, locality, and even a family. At the same time, all are recognizable as pasta, and so as Italian. As Castellanos and Bergstresser put it: “The general concept, pasta, is shared nationally, while its specific forms allow for local identity to be represented” (Castellanos and Bergstresser 2004: 8). Local variety is subsumed into national taste, which can then be contrasted to outsiders’ inability to make pasta properly (that is, *al dente*) or to recognize the standards regulating variation. Being Italian means making, eating, knowing and loving pasta in its multiple local forms, though *mamma’s* is always best.

A more complex pattern has been followed in India, where even greater linguistic and cultural distinctions divide regions, cities and villages. These distinctions are overlain by caste restrictions on food that make the development of a national cuisine a difficult project indeed. This extreme differentiation coincides with an oral tradition of local culinary traditions and the historical absence of any pan-Indian cuisine, though there was a strong, shared consciousness of the impossibility of sharing food between caste groups. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the invading Muslim Mughal regime did develop a high cuisine that is now recognized by most foreigners as quintessentially Indian, although in fact it only blended the culinary traditions of the Afghan invaders and the peasant foods of North India. Later the British colonialists and their Anglo-

## Food and Authenticity

Indian allies began to develop a truly subcontinental food regime, based on their own standardization of recipes, giving the world the notion that 'curry' is the ultimate Indian food. In the last few decades Mughlai and colonial curries have both been incorporated into a more inclusive national Indian cuisine via the propagation of Indian cookbooks.

As traced by Arjun Appadurai (1988) this proliferation of cookbooks is a result of the efforts of two linked upper middle class groups, which are both products of increased social and spatial mobility in modern India. The first are international professionals who have returned to India, and who seek to recapture the culinary traditions of their forebears; the second are members of the indigenous urban middle class who wish to publicize the cuisine of their native localities. The nostalgic impulse of these cosmopolitan elites has led to what Appadurai calls "a set of generalized gastroethnic images" which not only codify local foodways, but also construct new overarching categories such as 'South Indian', which lump together food from a number of formerly distinctive regional cuisines (Appadurai 1988: 16).

Meanwhile, national cookbooks, aimed primarily at an urban middle class and international audience, have also appeared, written by the same categories of people who are authors of regional cookbooks. These manuals bring together supposedly typical regional dishes within an imposed framework of a 'menu' consisting of a series of apparently natural but actually quite arbitrary categories: rice dishes, breads, lentils, vegetables, sweets and savories, pickles and chutneys, and sometimes beverages. The codifying of standard dishes and combinations has corresponded with an increasing emphasis on variety as an Indian value in itself, worthy of pursuing in one's eating habits. The message to the internationalist and urban South Asian middle class is that Indians can now incorporate recipes from a variety of regions and traditions into an authentically Indian meal, and that Indian food can now properly be served alongside the cuisines of other nations.

In India, as in Italy and Belize, a transnational population has had the central role in recovering and instituting food traditions that are then taken by them to be authentic and characteristic of the nation as a whole. In Italy, this process has focused on pasta: a single food item that permits infinite local variations. In Belize, a simple set of foodstuffs has been taken as typical and is now consumed by everyone. In India, there is no single overarching category,

## Food and Authenticity

though curry comes close. Nor is there any limited set of foods all Indians recognize as authentically Indian. Instead, what is most valued by the epicure is the rediscovery and maintenance of local traditions, which are then incorporated into a diversified and polyglot menu that is 'Indian' primarily in its inclusiveness. And while Italian pasta and 'real Belizean food' are integrated into popular consciousness as symbolic representations of national identity, in India the audience for nationalist and regionalist menus is overwhelmingly from the same people who have written the cookbooks: the cosmopolitan, urban middle classes uprooted from the countryside.

In other words, the construction of an authentic Indian national cuisine remains an expression of "exile, nostalgia and loss" (Appadurai 1988: 18). This reflects the incredible complexity and internal differentiation of India, which obdurately resists systematic codification. It also reflects to the fact that the transnational migrants who instigated the Indian search for an authentic local cuisine were mostly from a highly literate and professional Westernized elite, while in Belize and Italy out-migration was more popularly based. In India, most of the peasantry remained immobile on the land and in their villages. As a result, they never needed to read a book written by an urban sophisticate to discover who they are and what they should eat; they knew already.

A much more successful unification of cuisine and national identity has taken place in France, but in this instance it was neither colonialism nor migration that stimulated awareness of the national significance of local food and drink. It was revolution. When the revolutionary French republic was founded, only 20% of the population spoke 'proper' Parisian French; 30% could not understand it at all. It was therefore necessary, as Eugen Weber (1976) famously put it, to turn "peasants into Frenchmen," a laborious process akin to internal colonization.

One post-revolutionary response to French internal diversity was to intimately link consumption and cuisine with national identity. This model of nationhood was first proposed around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by the French geographer Paul Vidal de la Blache, whose ideas were adopted by the Third Republic for inclusion into national textbooks, and as a result became deeply integrated into French culture. In his lectures, Vidal argued that France was the natural geographical crossroads of the civilized peoples of Europe. According to him, "the diversity of people within France, reflected in regional identities, gave the nation a unique ability to

## Food and Authenticity

assimilate and transform what it received” (Quoted in Guy 2003: 137). In other words, because of its nature as an amalgam of cultures and regions, France could synthesize the universal and the particular – thus fulfilling its world-historical mission by bringing together what nature had divided.

Vidal believed that the incorporative French national destiny was revealed concretely in the *terroir* of France. Originally referring to a wine-growing region, the notion of *terroir* was expanded after the belle époque to mean “the combination of natural factors (soil, water, slope, height above sea level, vegetation, microclimate) and human ones (tradition and practice of cultivation) that gives a unique character to each small agricultural locality and the food grown, raised, made, and cooked there” (Petrini 2001: 8). For Vidal, the various *terroir* of France provided both the source and the expression of French historical memory; together, the various *terroir* comprised the soul of the nation, unifying the provinces that had been liberated by the Revolution.

What this meant in practice was that France could be conceptualized as a nation that is quite literally a map of related but varied cuisines, each derived from a specific *terroir*. All of these various cuisines then could be harmoniously integrated and enjoyed by all the populace. It is no surprise that the French term *la carte* means not only menu but also map. From Vidal’s point of view, listing regional specialties on the menu of a restaurant reinforced the natural links between cuisine and nation; consuming these specialties located the essence of France in guts of the citizen/gastronome (see Spang 2000). Wine, in particular, was regarded as the “the realization of a resulting French *esprit* in the material world.... the same words (are used) to describe both the qualities of Frenchness and the qualities of French wines. Wines and national identity become so intertwined that it is difficult to invoke the one without eliciting the other.” As one enthusiast remarked about Champagne: “This wine resembles us, it is made in our image: it sparkles like our intellect; it is lively like our language” (quoted in Guy 2003: 44, 4, 1).

Vidal assumed that the properties of each particular *terroir* actually constructed the personalities of those who lived and worked on it and who ate its foods and drank its wines. Like their produce, the local people were authentic expressions of their soil. This meant that regional divisions ought to express genuine differences in food production, and should not conform to

## Food and Authenticity

arbitrary limits imposed by a central government. Therefore he testified in favor of redrawing old boundaries to confirm to the natural geography of the terroir. However, despite claims to scientific rigor, the effort to reformulate regional boundaries according to supposedly natural organic principles was hardly apolitical or disinterested. In fact, what was at stake was control over authenticity: that is, which towns and villages would be officially designated as containing the proper natural environment and culture for the production of registered wines and liquors. Producers in the designated region could then make claims to be the only real Bordeaux, Burgundy, or Champagne and charge consumers accordingly. <sup>6</sup> As Robert Ulin notes, this process “takes for granted the social construction of authenticity, quality, and taste, and therefore tends to naturalize the social and historical conditions that have long differentiated winegrowers” (1995: 520).

Bordeaux, for example, is generally assumed to have the best natural terroir for wine production. However, up until the 12<sup>th</sup> century wine from the high regions of southwest France was considered much superior to wine from around Bordeaux. It was with the English invasion of France that Bordeaux gained prestige, mainly because its wine could be easily transported. “The importance of Bordeaux wine is not based on climate but on their better organization of marketing to Northern Europe” (Enjallbert 1953, quoted in Ulin 1995: 521). The priority of Bordeaux increased due to the growers’ strategy of developing *grand cru* or elite wines using old rootstocks, smaller yields, and longer aging, all of which were said to improve the quality of the product, but which also required very considerable capital investment as well as an intensification of labor, leading in turn to a proletarianization of the work force and the monopolization and consolidation of the fields in the hands of a small number of producers.

The elite growers’ strategy of developing expensive wines was supported by French lawmakers, who in 1855 officially codified the grand cru classifications that favored single domain production. <sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, wealthy vigneron built replicas of aristocratic chateaus that they pictured on their bottles, reinforcing claims to noble status for themselves and ancient lineages for their wines (although after the phylloxera epidemic at the turn of the century all French wine has been grown from rootstock imported from the United States). <sup>8</sup> The question of whether the wine of these grand chateaus is ‘better’ in any absolute sense can never be answered,

## Food and Authenticity

but they did have great snob appeal due to their rarity, their cost and their association with luxury and aristocratic heritage. The relationship between chateau production, a manufactured noble lineage, and a state sponsored affirmation of the authenticity of wine grown on the great estates worked to the disadvantage of the remaining small vigneron who, in regions like Médoc, are likely to occupy vineyards bordering directly on those of a grand cru, and to grow exactly the same grapes on the same soil and with the same techniques. Nonetheless, their wine sells for very much less. Terroir, in turns out, is not transparently natural, and authenticity in French cuisine is a matter not just of origin, but also of power. 9

### **Slow Food: Saving the World for Pleasure**

So far, I have neglected an extremely important factor that has stimulated an increased demand for authentic local foods, especially by consumers in the advanced industrial nations. This has been the development of new and controversial technologies of genetic engineering, the propagation of hybrid crops, the extensive use of growth hormones and other chemicals, the invention of industrialized techniques to produce meat, fruit and vegetables, and the breeding of highly specialized species, among other innovations. However safe and beneficial these novelties may prove to be, they nonetheless challenge taken for granted notions of the naturalness of what we eat and drink. All of this has led toward a vastly heightened concern in the developed world with authenticity in the growing, producing, and preparing of foods and to the rise of social movements dedicated to the purification of food production and the preservation of distinctive local cooking. In Europe in particular, fears of genetic engineering, bureaucratic rationalization of production, and other “EU horrors” have led to massive protests. Although some of these protests are linked with nationalist ideologies, others are not. The latter reveal a new direction in the search for culinary authenticity.

Perhaps the most successful and representative of non-nationalist protest movements revolving around food has been the Arcigola, which began in the provincial town of Bra in the Langhe region of Northern Italy. Bra is a backwater industrial city once well-known for leather-work, for the pervasive sour smell of tannin in its streets, and for its plethora of voluntary associations. In the 1970s and 80s, with the leather industry disappearing after a long eclipse, tourism was the only option available for economic development in the area. Food and wine

## Food and Authenticity

loving young members of ARCI, the Italian national recreational association of the political left, responded by forming the ‘Free and Praiseworthy Association of the Friends of Barolo’ (later self-styled as the Arcigola or ‘archgluttons’), with the aim of increasing awareness and consumption of local fine wine. Italy had already been the home of gourmet societies, 10 but this was something new. Where the earlier groups had been transitory apolitical clubs exclusively for gourmandizing elites, the Arcigola united a leftist ecological, anti-globalist agenda with a populist message stressing the political and economic utility of reclaiming authentic local traditions in the production and preparation of foodstuffs.

The Arcigola gained widespread public recognition in 1986 when it protested against construction of a McDonald’s near Rome’s famous Spanish Steps. Calling themselves the *nuovi edonisti* (new hedonists) and the *golosi democratici e antifascisti* (democratic and antifascist gluttons) the members, led by their charismatic president, Carlo Petrini, handed out bowls of penne pasta to illustrate the difference between prefabricated meals and local food. From this protest the Slow Food label was born, with the snail as its logo. Ever since, the movement has rapidly expanded, and has gained an international membership. Its manifesto, ratified by members from 15 countries in 1989, stated that “Fast life... disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods.” These depredations can only be opposed by “a firm defense of quiet material pleasure” which will “preserve us from the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency” (quoted in Petrini 2001: xxiii).

At present, Slow Food has approximately 80,000 members in 100 countries who gather in loosely organized voluntary groups called ‘conviviums’. Their task, Petrini says, is to save historical and localized producers, foster good taste, educate the public, and “reconstruct the individual and collective heritage” by “offering the world the hope of a future different from the polluted and tasteless one that the lords of the earth have programmed for all of us” (2001: 69, 110). Alongside its idealistic goals, the original Arcigola Movement also pursued an aggressive and quite successful campaign to draw tourists to the Langhe region by initiating wine and food tastings, publicity campaigns, and festivals. Guidebooks were written to educate the public about the quality of local wines, produce and restaurants. This pedagogic and profit-making initiative was then expanded to include Arcigola sponsored guidebooks about food and wine in all of Italy

## Food and Authenticity

and then later to other areas where a convivium was located. Also, colossal yearly fairs were organized where international producers of traditional foods were honored and their foodstuffs were marketed. In sum, the program of Slow Food combined a defense of tradition, education in taste, and savvy commercialism within what its manifesto calls an “International Movement in Defense of the Right to Pleasure.”

The solemnity of the Slow Food Movement can seem bombastic and absurd. For instance, at one meeting of a convivium in my home town of Cambridge each taster spent the evening conscientiously sampling many different kinds of salt, each displayed in a pile on its own little plate. The members marked scorecards to be compared and scored at the end of the exercise. But according to its vision of itself Slow Food is a serious revolutionary movement that is striving to transform modern culture by completely altering the ways food is grown, prepared, and eaten. Participants believe themselves to be part of an empowering network of “brothers from all over the world,” an “international alliance of the Earth caretakers” struggling against the evils of global agro-business. As Petrini told participants in the international food fair in 2004, “When you return to your villages... you will know that you are no longer alone.” 11

According to the ideology of Slow Food, the participant in the conviviums believe that the protection, production and consumption of traditional food and drink is a precondition for the development of good taste, which in turn is reckoned to be a moral value of the highest importance, capable of “saving the world.” The argument is that industrialized fast food is of course nasty, impure and dangerous; but that is not the worst of it. Even more dangerously, fast food ruins genuine communal identity and the legacy of history, as revealed in the venerable traditions of the countryside. If we do not eat proper food grown and prepared in the original manner, we cannot experience the powerful ancestral links that bind us together. Fast food and existential anomie go together.

However, the Slow Food manifesto does not favor returning to the localized rural world of yesterday when people ate the same things throughout their entire lives. Though healthy, that would be just as tedious as a diet of McDonald’s hamburgers, and would destroy the individual’s sacred sense of taste, defined by Petrini as “a restless creature that thrives on diversity, works retroactively to revive memories, and goes forward blindly, promising virtual pleasures” (2001:

## Food and Authenticity

71). Because habit is the enemy of taste, the Slow Food initiate must actively seek diversity. Petrini proclaims “to eat a different kind of food in every street in the world is the best answer to fast food” (2001: 18).

This aspect of the Slow Food Movement is an expression of the modern touristic quest for authenticity through repudiation of the mundane and exploration of the exotic. As Dean MacCannell puts it, “Authentic experiences are believed to be available only to those moderns who try to break the bonds of their everyday existence and begin to ‘live.’” From this perspective, Slow Food gourmets can be seen a subtype of the tourist whose task is to “discover or reconstruct a cultural heritage or social identity” in a world which has been irredeemably fragmented. As MacCannell argues, the effort to reconstitute lost totality in the disintegrated modern context can only succeed by celebrating multiplicity, visiting sites (and sounds and tastes) that the tourist accumulates “as an orderly series of formal representations, like snapshots in a family album” (MacCannell 1999: 159, 13, 15).

But for the Slow Food gourmet only a certain type of variety will do if a newly recovered taste is to be truly delicious and not indulgently clever or overwrought and therefore inauthentic. In the first place, whatever the revolutionary pleasure-seeker swallows, it must be made with the highest quality, certifiably purest ingredients, cooked in a traditional simple and unpretentious manner reflective of the unique terroir where it belongs. 12 Proper consumption also requires extensive knowledge of the varied history, cultural/ecological framework and labor involved in the manufacture of local comestibles. It is hard work to be a revolutionary eater. As Petrini informs us: “In order to learn how to find slow pleasure, one has to travel, read and taste, abandoning the temptation of entrenched isolation.” Having cultivated diversity and explored exotic traditions self-aware gastronomes become “allies who think alike while respecting one another at a distance.” They are members of a association that is “heterogeneous but strongly cohesive... an elite without excluding anyone.” The hoped-for end result is a world that “singles out, highlights, and values difference” but is unified by ecologically sound food production and preparation (Petrini 2001: 18-19, 39).

Leaving aside whether it is reasonable to link the experience of sensual enjoyment so closely to the preservation of natural variation (since what is natural is by no means guaranteed to

## Food and Authenticity

be tasty), the Slow Food Movement is based on a number of taken-for-granted assumptions that are worth teasing out for what they tell us about the pursuit of authenticity today. For one, authenticity is conceived to be a seductive and self-ratifying experience that unites origin and essence: when food is grown and prepared in the original way, it tastes as it should taste, and vice versa. Secondly, the true gourmand must be a food tourist, leaving the familiar and continually searching the world for new tastes. Diversity and novelty, the celebration of difference, is a value in itself. Thirdly, the new hedonism is a highly moralistic enterprise. At the very least, pursuing authentic food is thought to lead to a shared concern for the environment, empowerment, knowledge, and social responsibility. At most, it will revolutionize the world, eradicating exploitation, pollution and alienation,

Finally, and most importantly, authenticity is to be judged by enjoyment. If comestibles are authentic, they are *ipso facto* more pleasurable to consume than those that are inauthentic, and so are intrinsically worth searching out. From this perspective, enjoying a McDonald's hamburger is not only a moral failing; it is also, and much worse, a lapse into vulgarity, a betrayal of the self, and evidence of inauthenticity. Bad taste equals bad faith. The implicit assumption is that pure (and purified) pleasure is the basis for judging the truth of experience, taste, reality, morality, and relationships. As Petrini says: "we catch barely a glimpse of the fundamental concept that ought to underlie all these projects: that of 'feeling good' with oneself and with others" (2001: 73).

The Slow Food quest to achieve authenticity through the sensual experience of pleasure is a striking example of what Alasdair MacIntyre has called the modern philosophy of 'emotivism,' that is, "the doctrine that all evaluative judgements and more specifically all moral judgements are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character" (1981: 11). Freed from cultural conditioning by a never-ending education of the senses, Slow Food initiates become authentic people whose purified preferences can naturally determine what is genuine in the world around them.

### **Conclusion**

I have argued here that food and drink are central not only to life but also to the definition of an authentic felt identity, both personal and collective. Memory, status, and intimacy are all

## Food and Authenticity

evoked by acts of consumption, which are constructed in grammar-like codes that serve to differentiate individuals and groups from one another. The symbolic function of diet becomes especially salient when people have migrated from their homeland and are in danger of assimilation: for them eating traditional foods offers a powerful reminder of origin. Internal stratification and histories of resistance are also symbolically marked by acts of differentiating consumption.

But processes of international marketing and the spread of Fast Foods have threatened the continuity of diet worldwide. McDonaldization is feared as a global phenomenon that homogenizes tastes everywhere, eroding the existence of authentic gastronomic traditions. However, in fact the opposite trajectory may occur, as modernization and integration into the global marketplace may stimulate the rediscovery or invention of a local cuisine. The example offered here is Belize, where the re-evaluation and reinvention of 'real Belizean food' was in part a result of the nation's effort to differentiate and legitimate itself, but it was also due to precisely the factors that might seem to mitigate against the development of an indigenous cuisine: tourism and out-migration. In fact, both led Belizeans to realize the symbolic and economic value of asserting their own local foodways. In the face of globalization, appreciation of authentic local cuisine has appeared and flowered as an assertion of national identity.

Migration was also important in the apotheosis of pasta as the authentic food of Italy. Identifying themselves as Italians and pasta eaters, returning immigrants brought a sense of unity to the weakly legitimized Italian state. This identification was made easier by the multiplicity of forms pasta takes, so that in its particular expression it could represent local identity, while as a general category it could represent the nation as a whole.

No such simple correlation occurred in India, where a cosmopolitan upper middle class of international migrants and urbanites has recently sought to construct both regional and national cuisines through the writing of cookbooks. Stimulated by feelings of exile, loss and nostalgia, the reciprocal effort to typify and unify corresponds with a pursuit of variety as a value and the imposition of menu-like categories on Indian foods. However, the construction of an authentic national cuisine remains incomplete, due to the sheer immensity of the task, to the marginality

## Food and Authenticity

and motivations of those seeking to carry it out, and to the continued existence of a large rural peasantry disinterested in issues of authenticity.

A more successful integration was carried out in France, where a post-revolutionary nation had little cultural unity, but considerable legitimacy. One of the ways peasants were made into Frenchmen was through the concept of *terroir* – the designation of regions according to their unique geographies, foodways and cultures. From this point of view, France was pictured as a set of naturally occurring *terroir* that together express the organic unity of the nation and its cuisine. Organizing the state on the basis of the *terroir* model was a way of affirming the authenticity of the local production of foods and wines, and of the integrated culture that consumed them. But, as the history of Bordeaux shows, *terroir* was actually assigned in a manner that followed paths often more political than natural.

Finally, while the previous cases paired food and nation in the production and pursuit of authenticity, the Slow Food Movement in Europe has followed a more personalized as well as a more revolutionary trajectory. Combining entrepreneurship with political correctness and a New Age sensibility, the Movement argues that an authentic meal, prepared from pure ingredients properly prepared in the traditional manner, is necessarily delicious, and vice versa, while Fast Food is necessarily tasteless and polluting. Furthermore, local food is said to reaffirm ancestral values. But at the same time, Slow Food is an international cosmopolitan organization. Its watchword is variety, and its membership is enjoined to study and learn to enjoy foods from everywhere, as long as they are pure and properly prepared. This is a type of consumption tourism, seeking authenticity in the exotic, and valuing differentiation as a way of experiencing totality. In the Slow Food ideology, pleasure validates authenticity; from this perspective, enjoying fast food is a moral and personal failing of the first degree, while an educated palate is the route to truth. Not only do gourmets love and know authentic food in all its varieties, they also are authentic themselves.

What can be concluded from these cases? Simply that patterned variations in national and colonial history, economy, and culture correlate with parallel variations in the search for and consumption of authentic cuisine. And that the primal sin of the future may no longer be eating

## Food and Authenticity

an apple plucked from the tree of knowledge, but eating a hamburger scraped from the grill at MacDonalds.

### Endnotes:

1. However, it is worth noting that even fast food shows considerable cross-cultural variation. See the essays in Watson (1997) for examples.
2. According to Wilk, all Belizeans now eat lobster when they can, but it has become so popular that hardly anyone can afford it.
3. For an exhaustive outline of the far more complex taste hierarchy of France, see Pierre Bourdieu (1984).
4. For more on the dynamic relationship between center and periphery, and the development of local identity in a peripheral society (Trinidad), see Daniel Miller (1997).
5. According to one authority, there are at least 298 different types of dry pasta.
6. In 1908 Champagne became first legally recognized regional delimitation, followed by Cognac, Armagnac, Banyuls, and Bordeaux.
7. This hierarchical model of taste has recently been extended to French artisanal chocolate production. Chocolate, which actually is exported in industrially produced blocks, is said by chocolatiers to derive from different South American terroirs and to be blended in a manner reminiscent of *grand cru* wine. Relying on craftsmanship in the production of ornate chocolate confections and on tastings instructing laymen about the supposed purity and authenticity of these expensive products, a new elite industry has been manufactured. For this story, see Terrio (1996).
8. Replacing the old infected rootstock was a hugely expensive operation, which only the wealthiest could afford, thus reducing even more the number of independent small producers and the production of ordinary wine. Henceforth, grafted wines were not planted *en foule* but *en ligne* (in long rows) facilitating machine harvest, boosting yields, and reorienting the entire mode of production toward a more industrialized model.
9. For a contrasting example see Gefou-Madianou (1999). As Gefou-Madianou shows, rural Messogitic communities of Attica have identified themselves and have been identified by Athenian nationalists with the production and consumption of retsina wine. Formerly seen in negative light by the urbanite Athenians, of late retsina has been positively reevaluated as an authentic expression of Greek national identity. This 'double dialectic' has led to increased commodification of rural Messogitic traditions, and a gradual blurring of cultural distinctions between center and periphery. However, symbolic (and actual) power remains in the center, whereas in the French case large local-level producers gained control over considerable symbolic and actual capital.
10. The most important was the Accademia Italiana della cucina that was founded in Milan in 1953. Grimod de la Reynière in France based these societies on the Almanach des Gourmands founded at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. De la Reynière was the founder of gastronomic journalism in Europe as well.
11. These quotes are from a report on the Slow Food fair aired on National Public Radio Morning Edition, November 24, 2004.
12. Terroir is a key term in the Slow Food lexicon. In fact, much of the Slow Food ideology is derived from French notions of the correlation between food and identity.

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