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Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage

Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael A. Di Giovine

Ashgate Publishing, 2014. xiii, 237 pp.

In *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage*, Ronda Brulotte and Michael Di Giovine bring together food scholars from a variety of fields including anthropology, gastronomy, history, and architecture as well as from American, French, and Latin American studies to consider what happens when food is labeled “cultural heritage.” The chapters of this edited volume push the boundaries of previous notions of heritage by combining them with the concept of *terroir*, the “taste of place,” to emphasize the socio-biological connection that discourses of food heritage constructs between particular groups and geographies. Together, cultural heritage and *terroir* create a nuanced understanding of how food is mobilized as a symbolic, economic, and political resource.

The volume begins by problematizing the sometimes-static notions of cultural heritage and *terroir*. Heather Paxton shows cultural heritage has a tenuous relationship with the invention of tradition, because the idea of heritage invokes continuity with a distant past and invention of tradition points to discontinuity and the more recent point of creation for many traditions. In the case of American artisanal cheese production, it is the tradition of invention that gives these food commodities their claims to heritage. The cultural heritage in American cheesemaking does not come from an unchanging, traditionally produced food, but rather the practice of creativity in the production of new cheeses from older forms and methods. Warren Belasco expands upon this discussion of heritage that is not dependent on continuity with the past in his exploration of whether or not a place that has no “traditional” population or food, like Washington DC, can have a particular *terroir*. Drawing on Amy Trubek’s formulation of a newer, more democratized form of *terroir*, Belasco shows that the use of *terroir*, its coupling with place-branding, and the types of claims it allows is an area worthy of inquiry. These chapters emphasize that food heritage is a socially produced discourse that can include both continuity and change; it is in the particular ways lines are drawn and how heritage claims are mobilized that are truly of interest to food scholars.

The volume further explores the politics of cultural heritage and *terroir* by considering two mechanisms that codify claims of heritage and *terroir*: Geographic Indicators (also called designations of origin or appellations of origin) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Geographic Indicators are used in many countries and regions, mostly in Europe, to provide a guarantee to consumers of where a product comes from, how it was produced, and the quality associated with such production. UNESCO’s list works similarly on an international scale to identify particular practices, commodities, and whole cuisines as valuable to world heritage and for preservation. These two systems delineate ties between particular groups, environments, and food products with governmentally sanctioned protections. Many of the chapters explore the politics of claiming designation under these systems and the ways doing so can transform food commodities into economic and political resources to be leveraged. For example, Cristina Grassani discusses heritage cheese and ecomuseums in Italy where food production often become the star of television shows, festivals, and other promotions that drive local economies. Others show that these systems of recognition are executed in ways that are unexpected by the governing bodies, like Ronda Brulotte and Alvin Starkman’s work on *Caldo de Piedra*, an indigenous Oaxacan soup. The designation of this soup as part of Mexico’s culinary heritage gives it renewed economic importance, however the designation also opens it up for contestation: who has the right to produce and sell *Caldo de Piedra*—those who are members of the cultural group with which it is associated or anyone generally involved in the country’s culinary tradition? In some cases, food commodities or practices that are not officially recognized through UNESCO or Geographic Indicators still make claims of heritage. Regina Bendix’s contribution explores the case of heritage claims for German bread baking and the foreclosure of the possibility of Geographic Indicators for such products. Further, Miha Kozorog’s chapter on salamander brandy complicates the ways in which heritage claims are conceptualized for items that do not readily match ideas of appropriate heritage resources, such as hallucinogenic drugs. These chapters and others in the volume demonstrate the political and economic roles of food designated as cultural heritage, how defining ownership becomes problematic, and the ways Geographic Indicators, UNESCO, and other codifying institutions delineate what is and is not appropriate for inclusion as heritage.

One of the most salient themes throughout the volume is that invoking cultural heritage claims about food has increased importance in moments of crisis. This theme is best expressed by Greg de St. Maurice in his discussion of heirloom vegetables and culinary heritage in Japan, “authenticity is made to matter for issues that are a source of social anxiety. Examining articulations of authenticity reveals political and economic tensions as well as identity crises and cultural friction” (74). Carole Counihan also explores this theme in her discussion of the role of cultural heritage in Italian food activism. While appeals to cultural heritage emphasize local products and economies they often elide over other more difficult to deal with facts like the inclusion of immigrants or unjust labor practices in the production of such products. Counihan closes the volume by reiterating the importance of paying close attention to the symbolic, economic, and political power of claims to cultural heritage of food.

Throughout the book, the types of heritage claims and politics discussed are leveraged by groups that, arguably, still have some form of access to the identities the food is tied to. The politics surrounding heritage food claims are sometimes framed in terms of reactions against globalization and increased immigration, but there is little discussion of those immigrants being involved in or affected by such claims. Counihan’s final chapter begins this discussion urging readers to dive deeper in exploring the complex politics surrounding food heritage claims

to consider not only the populations that they serve but also the populations they erase. She mentions Pakistani and Moroccan butchers producing prosciutto and Sikhs, Albanians, and Romanians raising cattle and sheep for cheese-production in Italy. These facts complicate the lines of difference and authenticity that claims of the cultural heritage and terroir of food seek to produce. This volume lays the groundwork for understanding the symbolic, economic, and political importance of food as a form of cultural heritage and provides an in-road for researchers seeking to use food as method for asking complicated questions about identity, crisis, and globalization.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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biography | Daniel Shattuck is a PhD candidate in anthropology at the University of New Mexico. He currently conducting fieldwork in Florence, Italy for his dissertation project focused on extra virgin olive oil in Tuscany. His interests include the production of specialized knowledge and authenticity, food policy and politics, national and regional identity, culinary tourism, and immigration.