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Ethnic food: the other in ourselves

Abstract

Food is a powerful cultural signifier. It can connote inclusiveness, belonging, attachment and be a symbolic expression of social binding. Similarly, food can signify exclusiveness, generate stereotypes and feelings of revulsion and disgust which demarcate boundaries between the us and the other. As Marcel Proust's teasoaked sweet Madeleine illustrates, food can produce good memories as much as recall painful experiences. Food is as much a nutritional and physiological requirement as it is cultural, symbolic and meaningful. Multi-ethnic societies praise their food diversity and flag it as a marker of inclusiveness. Australian cuisine is supposed to be a representation of cultural and ethnic diversity underpinned by its culinary variety in foods and tastes. As the food writer Cherry Ripe claims, '... we have become some of the most eclectic eaters in the world.'¹ Banning the 'ethnicity factor' from the Australian cuisine would be unthinkable. Yet this is not universally the case. For example, a 2009 article in the New York Times read, 'A walled city in Tuscany clings to its ancient menu.'² The article reflected on the Italian right-wing city council of Lucca and its controversial decision to ban 'ethnic' restaurants from its historical centre. Ethnic food was regarded as a malaise that destabilised the concept of Italian cuisine, its culinary roots and essential traditions. Ethnic food and the 'other from within' constituted a threat to Italian-ness. Based on these case studies, this chapter explores the concept of ethnic food as a site of struggle where the national is challenged, destabilised and re-invented. It examines how representations of ethnic food are contextual and evaluates the meanings of a national cuisine by asking: does what is on your plate change who you think you are?

Keywords

ourselves, other, food, ethnic

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Ethnic Food: The *Other* in Ourselves

Paula Arvela

Abstract

Food is a powerful cultural signifier. It can connote inclusiveness, belonging, attachment and be a symbolic expression of social binding. Similarly, food can signify exclusiveness, generate stereotypes and feelings of revulsion and disgust which demarcate boundaries between the *us* and the *other*. As Marcel Proust's tea-soaked sweet Madeleine illustrates, food can produce good memories as much as recall painful experiences. Food is as much a nutritional and physiological requirement as it is cultural, symbolic and meaningful. Multi-ethnic societies praise their food diversity and flag it as a marker of inclusiveness. Australian cuisine is supposed to be a representation of cultural and ethnic diversity underpinned by its culinary variety in foods and tastes. As the food writer Cherry Ripe (1993) claims, '... we have become some of the most eclectic eaters in the world.'¹ Banning the 'ethnicity factor' from the Australian cuisine would be unthinkable. Yet this is not universally the case. For example, a 2009 article in the *New York Times* read, 'A walled city in Tuscany clings to its ancient menu.'² The article reflected on the Italian right-wing city council of Lucca and its controversial decision to ban 'ethnic' restaurants from its historical centre. Ethnic food was regarded as a malaise that destabilised the concept of Italian cuisine, its culinary roots and essential traditions. Ethnic food and the 'other from within' constituted a threat to Italian-ness. Based on these case studies, this chapter explores the concept of ethnic food as a site of struggle where the national is challenged, destabilised and re-invented. It examines how representations of ethnic food are contextual and evaluates the meanings of a national cuisine by asking: does what is on your plate change who you think you are?

Key Words: Ethnic food, Italian cuisine, Australian cuisine, cultural identities, culinary diversity, national cuisines.

1. Introduction

Ethnic food is a site of struggle where the national is contested and destabilised as well as re-invented, re-made and re-mixed. I examine how representations of ethnic food are contextual, discursive and located in the competing fields where cultural identities are performed. By way of comparison, I explore distinct cultural enactments of ethnic foodways within two national milieus. In Australia, culinary multiculturalism is celebrated with *gusto* as a significant feature of national culture; by contrast, in Italy ethnic restaurants are jettisoned from inside the walls of the city of Lucca – Tuscany, as its right-wing city council promotes Italian-ness

and discourages and segregates any culinary representation which is perceived as destabilising and threatening.

Food is a powerful cultural marker. At home, food represents the taken-for-granted safety-net that provides 'ontological security.'³ Abroad, food constitutes one of the imaginary bridges that can keep the individual grounded and connected with the memories of familiar faces, customs, practices, tastes and smells that were left behind.

These features highlight the major role of foodways in displaced communities of diaspora. For example, a study by Fiss⁴ in 2001 recognised that Portuguese immigrants in Brazil eat bacalhau⁵ to remain emotionally attached to the motherland, its customs, traditions and the relevant *others* in the 'imagined communities'⁶ they left behind. Likewise, Kay Richardson,⁷ after exploring Australians' predilection for vegemite and how much expatriates missed it whilst overseas, concludes that 'most Aussies living abroad have discovered that they no longer have to hide a jar in their suitcase, as it is now available locally.'⁸

Exploring the connection between diasporic communities and their foodways is a significant aspect of my research for several reasons. Firstly, it underscores food's role as a bonding agent in culturally and geographically displaced communities; secondly, it recognises commensality as a contributor to emotional well-being and a facilitator in the process of integration in the host community. Finally, it assists the understanding of how ethnic foods are discursively deployed. By examining and comparing the Australian and Italian cultural attitudes to ethnic foods, this study will contribute to a better understanding of their role in the production of hybrid cuisines which endorse innovative routes to social change and cultural syncretism.

2. Ethnic foods in the global village

Like ethnicity itself, ethnic cuisine only becomes a self-conscious, subjective reality when ethnic boundaries are crossed.⁹

Ethnic foods are called into being in their encounter with the foodways of the *other*. They are defined by *difference*. They only become recognised as such, after being 'disembedded'¹⁰ from their locality and re-imbedded into a new context where *difference* makes them visible. Under the current conditions of globalisation, the high permeability of national borders has facilitated and accelerated the dissemination of peoples, cultures and foods. As people move, they carry with them their ethnic background and the signifiers that qualify it. Ethnicity does not exist in, and of itself. Ethnicity does not exist outside culture – it is constructed by it and constituted in it. For example, *The Pasta Channel* reporting the results of a 2007 Harris Poll, asserted that 'the most popular ethnic food in America is Italian

food...’¹¹ Conversely in Europe, in 2010 the British Nutrition Foundation (BNF) defined ethnic foods as those constituted by ‘all non-Europeans cuisines.’¹² That is, whilst in the USA Italian food was recognised as ethnic food, in the UK, at least according to the BNF, only non-European foods are ethnic. Yet ironically, in 2001 the foreign secretary Robin Cook in a speech endorsing multicultural Britain, asserted that the Indian based-dish ‘Chicken Tikka Massala is now a true British national dish.’¹³ Thus, the naming of ethnic foods is purposeful, contextual, discursive and made to mark *difference*, however conceived at any given time. It is also a complex process that I seek to explore by examining and evaluating some of the possible causes underpinning the different cultural representations of ethnic foods in Australia and Italy.

A. The Australian Case

Chicken cacciatore on a Sunday, ravioli on a Monday, noodle
fish cakes on a Tuesday, Mongolian stir fry on a
Wednesday...What does this say about the Australian palate.¹⁴

This is how the Australian food writer Cherry Ripe described the diverse nature of Australian eating habits and cuisine. Ripe concludes ‘... we have become some of the most eclectic eaters in the world.’¹⁵ Ethnic diversity in Australian foodways is perceived as a positive facet of its cuisine and a valuable cultural signifier against which Australians inscribe their cultural identities. But ethnic food has also become associated with a specific cohort of individuals inhabiting the urban and affluent spaces of cosmopolitanism. For them, ethnic food has become a signifier which they can freely appropriate as ‘cultural capital’¹⁶ and that they willingly integrate in their processes of cultural identification.

Ethnic food in large cities has become a signifier of ‘culinary cultural capital.’¹⁷ Expanding on Bourdieu’s concept, David Bell used ‘culinary cultural capital’ to describe the acquisition of culinary expertise that confers distinction, taste and classifies their holders as gourmands. Furthermore, Bell asserted that the urban diversity in ethnic foods and restaurants provides these individuals with ample consumption choice which enhances their status and social-cultural distinction when dining out. Exploring the same area of research, Warde et al.¹⁸ argue that this cohort of urban audiences have become proficient practitioners in ‘cultural omnivorousness’, that is, they developed accurate skills at choosing, mixing-and-matching the ethnic diversity to suit their own purposes. As Warde et al. concluded ‘...the pursuit of variety of consumer experience is a feature of particular social group ... (to) ... express social distinction.’¹⁹ Thus, Ripe’s previous portrayal of Australian culinary diversity is a clear example of ‘cultural omnivorousness.’²⁰

Ethnic foods fulfil different purposes for different people. Whereas for the urban audiences, ethnic foods represent culinary cultural capital, for the ethnic-self, it is a way of life. Food only becomes *ethnic* when marked by *difference* of traversed boundaries. Yet, it is exactly this aspect that reinforces feelings of solidarity with the ethnic-*same*, perpetuating the familiarity and comforts of what is already known. For these reasons ethnic food acquires significant meaning in diasporic communities. It strengthens cultural ties and social bonds, asserting shared cultural origins, which is enacted in commensality. Ethnic food is a tool of cultural survival.²¹

The following analysis of the Italian case study expands further on the topic. It examines Italian foodways, once a food of diaspora, and evaluates how this facet of Italian cuisine might have influenced the decisions made by the officials in Lucca which marginalized the foods of the ethnic-*others*.

B. The Italian Case

Lucca's centre-right city council recently stirred much contention and accusations of racism by prohibiting new ethnic food restaurants from opening within its gorgeous historical centre.²²

According to Donadio's article, ethnic food was regarded as a malaise that destabilised the concept of Italian cuisine, its culinary roots and essential traditions. Ethnic food constituted a threat to Italian-ness.

Acting as cultural gatekeeper, Lucca's city council perpetuated the cultural representation of unified long-held customary culinary practices rooted in continuity and permanency. Not surprisingly, any event destabilising these assumed certainties generated anxieties and ambiguity. Yet as the following analysis illustrates, Italian's culinary traditions and alleged cultural purity are but a narrative aiming at describing imagined and nostalgic representations of integrated and unified foodways. Moreover, despite the city of Lucca's animosity towards ethnic foods, a process of culinary integration is simultaneously taking place in Italy.

The 2012 BBC series *Two Greedy Italians*²³ hosted by the celebrity chefs Antonio Carluccio and Gennaro Contaldo, are a case in point. In this TV series, Carluccio and Contaldo visited a vegetable farm owned by an Asian female farmer showcasing a range of 'exotic' vegetables – bok-choy and other Asian greens – cultivated alongside familiar Italian vegetables – tomatoes and eggplants. On the same program, Carluccio and Contaldo interviewed a market tour-guide whose function was to take customers on tours to introduce them to the vast array of products available from the market stalls, most of them unknown or unfamiliar to Italian customers and Italian cooking. Finally, Carluccio and Contaldo visited a

local restaurant that specialised in Fusion Food. The female chef cooked for the celebrity guests a 'fusion risotto'. The dish included ginger, shitake mushrooms, bok-choy and miso. Hesitantly, Carluccio and Contaldo ate it. Despite acknowledging that they had enjoyed its flavours, sarcastically they remarked: 'it's ok, but don't call it risotto; call it fusotto' (fusion+risotto).²⁴

These examples are informative. On the one hand, they illustrate the hostility in some sectors of the Italian public towards some of the effects of globalisation and Europeanisation, in particular the presence of *ethnic* others and their foods in Italian cities. On the other hand, these examples also demonstrate that the introduction and integration of new products and practices into contemporary Italian foodways is (and has always been) taking place.

These cases also highlight the irony within narratives of culinary Italian-ness. Constructed as pristine, unified and rooted in time and practice, these narratives do not take into account that many of the products that are currently recognised as Italian (tomatoes and eggplant) are not native ingredients and were introduced into the Italian foodways by *others*.²⁵ Moreover, these narratives rarely acknowledge that Italian food in the Western world owes its popularity to the omnipresence of Italian diaspora in Europe, the USA and Australia.

These examples further underscore the inevitability of cultural syncretism. Contrary to the essentialist/conservative discourse, diversity is inescapable and enriching. What would Italian cuisine be, without tomatoes or eggplants? The thought of pure cultural forms is but a chimera.

3. Narratives of ethnic foods and national cuisines

To understand the role of *ethnic* foods within the context of the nation-state one needs to first explore how the concepts of national cuisines are generated, by whom and for what purposes. Validating the significant cultural role of food as a signifier of nation, commentators have argued that currently nations are as expected to have a national cuisine as they are to have a national anthem or a national flag.²⁶ Concurrently, studies carried out by Arjun Appadurai,²⁷ Carol Helstosky²⁸ and Sally Howell²⁹ have also illustrated how cuisines, in particular national cuisines, are discursively produced by national elites as tools of nation-building and signifiers of national culture.

In turn, and as I have addressed earlier, *ethnic* foods and ethnicity only come into being when set against the food of the non-ethnic *other*.³⁰ Thus, we need to explore how Italian and Australian national cuisines have been imagined and how they articulate with the cuisines and foods of the ethnic *others* with whom they share the same national territory.

Italian cuisine and foodways are represented as strong signifiers of national culture and national identities. According to the Italian cultural gatekeepers, Italian cuisine is integral to the narrative of Italian-ness. Yet, Italy did not become a unified nation-state until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Finding

common identity markers for nation-building proved a difficult task to accomplish in a geographic territory divided by strong local and regional identities. According to Helstosky the work of Pellegrino Artusi was decisive. In his popular and successful cookbook published in 1891 Artusi, a businessman and gourmand, meticulously codified and classified foods and recipes, producing what has been recognised as the 'language' for a national cuisine that unified Italians around the table.³¹ In a country where strong local and regional allegiances to products and eating habits were more divisive than unifying, Artusi's cookbook was pivotal in providing the newly formed nation-state with a signifier of national culture. In Italy, just as in post-independence India,³² cookbooks and the language of cuisine proved to be significant tools of nation-building, albeit not the only one. In this process the contribution of Italian diaspora in promoting Italian foodways cannot be overemphasised.³³

The nineteenth century waves of Italian immigrants to the Americas, particularly to the USA, contributed to the staggering total of nine million Italians - one quarter of the total Italian population - living outside Italy by the 1920s.³⁴ Again, during the fascist years of Mussolini and after WWII, the exodus increased as Italians searched for better and brighter futures elsewhere. In diaspora, commensality was pivotal in establishing social and cultural bonds amongst Italian immigrants at the same time as it promoted and disseminated the Italian-ethnic foodways in the countries of settlement.³⁵

Food became more of a unifier in diaspora than it had been in Italy. That is, the idea of Italian food was as much generated from the inside (Italy) as from the outside (diaspora).³⁶ Whereas within the borders of the nation-state, local and regional differences were vehemently upheld as robust identification markers of locality and regionalism, they became of secondary relevance in diaspora where the unity that migrants required to thrive in a foreign land was the priority. Abroad, differences were put aside to create strong links between diasporic Italians. Disembedded from its original environment and re-imbedded into a new context, Italian foodways connoted Italian-ness and asserted cultural identities. *Ethnic-Italian* food was empowered and became empowering.

The impetus to eat the food that *mamma* cooked had a double effect. On the one hand, it unified immigrant communities around the table asserting national allegiances.³⁷ On the other hand, it created a market for Italian products, which assisted entrepreneurial immigrants to generate successful businesses and to promote Italian food abroad. The new diasporic markets gave a most-needed boost to a weak Italian economy by developing new industries such as Italian pastas, cheeses, olive oil, cured meat, and tinned tomatoes.³⁸

The role of food as a powerful signifier of national identity might start to clarify the city of Lucca's dismissal of the foodways of the ethnic-*other*. Whereas inside Lucca's territorial boundaries, ethnic food destabilised the town's sense of self and threatened Italian-ness, in Australia *ethnic* food has different connotations.

Australia has its own particularities and complexities that cannot be explored in this study. Nevertheless, Australia's past as a British colony was stamped by a policy of cultural sameness and white supremacy. Early Australian food was English food, with Sunday roast and three vegetables. Australian Aboriginal native foods, eating habits and cooking methods are yet to be integrated in everyday food practices. Likewise, the Chinese foodways brought by Chinese immigrants during the gold-rush of the nineteenth century, only became slowly integrated after a process of 'domestication' and regulation in accordance to the norms and codes determined by the hegemonic establishment.

Changes to food habits and cooking practices were slow to occur. The 1950s' waves of government-sponsored southern European immigrants arriving to Australian shores, found their foodways belittled and frequently referred to as *WOG* food.³⁹ However, their visibility and presence contributed to slow shifts in cultural attitudes to ethnic foods, which were being partially introduced by the increasingly influential advertising industry, actively sponsoring new consumption signifiers against which identification processes were generated. Concurrently, the increasing number of Australians travelling overseas in the 1970s stimulated growing curiosity and tolerance for the culture and eating habits of ethnic *others*. Ethnic foods acquired new cultural signification for a growing and influential Australian middle-class.

By the 1980s *WOG* food became fashionable. Stylised, Italian, Greek, Lebanese and Asian foods became acceptable and even desirable. This shift was a direct consequence of changes in Australian society conducive to new conceptualisations of Australian national identities. The societal ethnic make-up had changed and so had its constitutive intelligentsia responsible for challenging the terms in which national identities were being formulated. The new aspirational middle-class was partly, but importantly, constituted by second-generation Australian-born and raised individuals, with strong links to the ethnic cultures of their forebears. They were no longer outsiders; they now had the power to name. They were integrated and educated citizens, empowered by cultural capital.

This new generation could practice cultural politics and name cultural signifiers that re-shaped Australian national culture and identities. Culturally sanctioned, these individuals could disseminate their hybrid culture, legitimise it, validate it and decisively reformulate the new Australian cuisine and foodways. Australian food was being re-defined into something new, inclusive of what had been previously recognised as the ethnic-*other*. This generation's own experience as children of immigrants, and themselves 'in-between' two cultures, were holders of complex non-essentialised, fractured and dynamic processes of identification. They had the cultural competency to understand *otherness*.

4. Conclusion

This comparative study highlights the way collective identities can be constructed. They can be thought of as essential, stable, exclusivist, hermetic, immutable and harnessed by tradition. Alternatively, cultural identities can be conceptualised as contextual, unstable but dynamic points of positioning always becoming something new that can be translated into new forms of cultural syncretism.⁴⁰

The institutional powers of the city of Lucca were vigorously holding on to the concept of a unified and homogeneous national culture. They forgot that no nation-state is represented by one ethnicity and that national culture is not unified and pure.⁴¹ As Renan observed 'the leading nations in Europe are nations of essentially mixed blood: Italy is the country where ... Gauls, Etruscans, Pelagians and Greeks, not to mention many other elements, intersect in an indecipherable mixture'.⁴² Thus, thinking of Italian foodways as coherent, unified and pristine does not acknowledge the many stories, peoples, places, practices and recipes that have evolved over time to make Italian food what it is today.

Notes

¹ Cherry Ripe, *Goodbye Culinary Cringe* (St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1993), 3.

² Rachel Donadio, 'A Walled City in Tuscany Clings to Ancient Mneú', *New York Times*, 12 March 2009, 13, Viewed 9 September 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/13/world/europe/13lucca.html?_r=1

³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 35-69.

⁴ Regina L. Fiss, 'A Imigração Portuguesa e as Associações como Forma de Manutenção da Identidade Lusitana-Sul do Brasil', *Scripta Nova* 94. 27 (2001), accessed 12 November 2012, <http://www.ub.edu/geocrit/sn-94-27/htm>.

⁵ Bacalhau is recognised as the Portuguese national dish.

⁶ Benedict R. O'G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁷ Kay Richardson, 'Vegemite, Soldiers and Rosy Cheeks', *Gastronomica* 3, No. 4 (2003): 60-62.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁹ Peter L. van den Bergh, 'Ethnic Cuisine: Culture in Nature', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 7. No. 3 (1984): 387-397.

¹⁰ Giddens, *Modernity Self-Identity*, 17.

¹¹ Dino Romano, 'Italian Food #1 in America,' *The Pasta Channel* (blog) nd., accessed October 2, 2012, (<http://thepastachannel.com/italian-food/>).

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- ¹² Georgine Leung, 'Ethnic Food in the UK,' *Nutrition Bulletin* 35(2010): 226-234, accessed October 1, 2012, <http://www.foodafactoflife.org.uk/attachments/f09d162f-9c7f-4cb70c3f6226.pdf>.
- ¹³ 'Robin Cook's Chicken Tikka Massala Speech,' *The Guardian*, 19 April 2001, accessed October 2, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/apr/19/race.britishidentity>.
- ¹⁴ Ripe, *Goodbye Culinary Cringe*, 3.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 3.
- ¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).
- ¹⁷ David Bell, 'Fragments for a New Urban Culinary Geography', *Journal for the Study of Food and Society* 6, No. 1 (2002): 10-21.
- ¹⁸ Allan Warde, Lydia Martens and Wendy Olsen, 'Consumption and the Problem of Variety: Cultural Omnivorousness, Social Distinction and Dining Out', *Sociology* 33, No. 1 (1999): 105-127.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 105.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ van den Berg, 'Ethnic Cuisine'.
- ²² Donadio, 'A Walled City'.
- ²³ *Two Greedy Italians*, dir. Caroline Ross Pirie (London: Quadrille, 2012).
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Tomatoes are products originated in Central America and eggplants are originally from India and China. Both were introduced in Italy by Arab traders.
- ²⁶ Ivan Cusack, 'African Cuisines: Recipes for nation-Building?', *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13, No. 2 (2000): 207-225.
- ²⁷ Arjun Appadurai, 'How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, No. 1 (1988): 3-24.
- ²⁸ Carol Helstosky, 'Recipe for the Nation: Reading Italian History Through La Scienza in Cucina and La Cucina Futurista', *Food and Foodways* 11 (2003): 113-140.
- ²⁹ Sally Howell, 'Modernizing Mansaf: The Consuming Contexts of Jordan's National Dish', *Food & Foodways* 11 (2003): 215-243.
- ³⁰ van den Bergh, 'Ethnic Cuisine'.
- ³¹ Helstosky, 'Recipe for the Nation', 27.
- ³² Appadurai, 'How to Make a National Cuisine'.
- ³³ Carol Helstosky, *Garlic and Oil. Politics of Food in Italy* (Oxford: Berg, 2004).
- ³⁴ Ibid., 28.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid.

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- ³⁷ Erick Castellanos and Sara M. Bergstresser, 'Food Fights at the EU Table: The Gastronomic Assertion of Italian Distinctiveness', in *European Studies: Food, Drink and Identity in Europe*, ed. Thomas M. Wilson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 182.
- ³⁸ Helstosky, *Garlic and Oil*, 31.
- ³⁹ WOG food was a derogatory term applied to the food of the southern European immigrants in Australia, specially Italian and Greek food.
- ⁴⁰ Stuart Hall, 'The Question of Culture Identity,' in *Modernity and its Futures*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 275-325.
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?,' in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 8-22.

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