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EATING ELSEWHERE, EATING “ LOCALLY”:

THE ROLE OF REGIONAL GASTRONOMY IN TOURISM

Jacinthe BESSIERE¹

By instituting a recognized national norm, French gastronomy is perceived as a common base, a collective marker which federates a common identity. The notion of “*eating well*” in France is a national code which qualifies, unites and identifies. When associated with holidays, in particular, the gastronomic experience seems to be the basis of many aspirations and representations. In this way, by analyzing tourism as a search for meaning and identity, it then seems appropriate to consider gastronomy as a component of the tourist quest. By inviting the partaker of food into a new space and identity, gastronomy can be a response to expectations that arise from modern-day dissatisfaction. The analysis which follows aims to position the rural area as a place where the individual finds compensation in food. The analysis will show how the emergence of gastronomy and the taste for local, country food corresponds to new aspirations: the current enthusiasm for gastronomy and what is called “*traditional*” or “*local*” cooking seems to go against the trend for industrialized food and homogenized tastes in a mainly urban society. The question will also be raised as to why regional gastronomy has such success. Finally, the last part will examine the privileged frame of reference of gastronomy in culture and identities for the “food-loving tourist” who is in search of reconciliation with food.

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1. ENTHUSIASM FOR “LOCAL PRODUCE”: A CONTEMPORARY NEED FOR GASTRONOMIC ROOTS

Nowadays the phenomenon of “*local produce*” is growing and benefitting from many media influences and a large number of publications connected with the catering sector. There are more and more books on regional cooking, the launch of gastronomic diagnostics, a whole range of cookery programmes and so on. Placed between what is becoming commonplace and mythification, local produce finds itself in contradiction to the current crisis in contemporary food which is branded with “*fear*” and “*guilt*”, and to which are added a determination to maintain culinary specificities within the context of European standardization.²

The myth of what is “natural” and the cult of “the past”

Today, rural areas benefit from a positive image that comes from the idea of Eden and consecration. Regional gastronomy is part of this trend of values which are generally associated with the myth of what is natural and the cult of the past. C. Fischler³ develops the idea of the natural myth as the opposite trend to urbanization. The development of the industrial, urban and technical civilization leads to the emergence of counter-currents. A complex counter-trend turned towards the future and the past confronts the dominant general tendency. “*Opposed to the idea – and the myth – of conquered nature, the myth and idea of regained nature develop*”, observes C. Fischler. “*At the avant-garde of urban psychology begins and develops an appeal to nature which is felt as opposition to the artificial world of towns, and a need for roots in, and communication with, authentic sources of existence.*”⁴ In fact, the desire for what is natural and “archaic” is conceived as a form of escape, as an aspiration to something which complements urban life.

² POULAIN JP., *Sociologies de l'alimentation*, PUF, Paris, January 2002.

³ FISCHLER C., *L'omnivore*, Paris, O. Jacob, 1990

⁴ The original text reads : « A l'avant-garde de la psychologie urbaine naît et se développe un appel vers la nature, ressenti par opposition au monde artificiel des villes, et un besoin d'enracinement, de communication avec les sources authentiques de l'existence ». MORIN E., « Néo-archaïsme urbain et nouveau modernisme rural », Paris, CETSAS, 1968, in *L'Esprit du Temps*, Paris, Grasset, 1975.

Food which is considered rustic and “*natural*” has found new favour. At the same time as there is growing suspicion of products in the food industry, reactions, whether they are imaginary or justified, are developing. Sometimes “*chemical products*” (colourings, different additives and so on) are systematically rejected. Professionals in the marketing and advertising sectors do not fail to find a way around this phenomenon: “*grandmother’s*” jam and “*farm*” pâté are now mass-produced products. Furthermore, the consumer wants to have information about all aspects of the product: “the Non-Identified Edible Object”⁵ must now “*have a history*”, must display its provenance, preparation and identity. The consumer requires greater proximity, whether it is real (direct sales) or imaginary (seal of quality and brand), with the producer and place of production.

The “*myth of what is natural*” can be illustrated by the “*principle of incorporation*”: by eating a product which is said to be “*natural*” or “*traditional*” it seems that, as well as incorporating the nutritional and psychosensorial qualities of the food, qualities which are highly symbolical are also incorporated. This is the appropriation of healthy nature, a culture and the identity of a region. It means penetrating into a social universe which is opposed to the universe of food industrialization. For example for the city dweller, eating a farm product can represent not only a guarantee of the biological quality, but also the ephemeral appropriation of the identity of the farming world. Symbolically he ingests a forgotten culture.

In this way, “*regional*” gastronomy conveys a mythical link with nature. It seems to have become an idealized norm, and becomes “*overvalued*”. A one-pot dish which is both copious and simple, and in the past frugal since it had to meet a daily need which was difficult to satisfy, today reflects solid and comforting rusticity. To that can be added the myth of the “*authentic*” product which is a refusal of anything which is complicated, improvised, and of any deviation from recipes which are said to be “*traditional*”. In all, this is an idealization which ignores the fact that ordinary rural cooking has borrowed many products and culinary codes from the town. Representatives of local gastronomy and cooking are, therefore, part of an imagined world of dishes or products which have been rethought, modified and altered in the collective memory which is then considered as selective or faltering.

The new course of the culinary art

The development of the food industry, the standardization of foodstuffs, and the decline of meals eaten together in modern society arouse contradictory composite aspirations which are, at the same time, mythical, backward-looking and new. Nowadays the cook’s slowly-cooked, rustic and lovingly-prepared meals are enjoying a popularity which had not

⁵ FISCHLER C., op.cit.

been seen before on account of the resurgence of that which is “*natural-archaistic*”. Local cooking or the food country families eat “*on Sunday*” is found on more and more restaurant menus at the high prices which are now charged by restaurants in the country.

In addition, the transmission of culinary knowledge is no longer what it was. There is a dispersal of know-how. The handing down of lists of recipes has been completely changed. Home cooking has moved away from the narrow framework of recipes learnt as part of the family tradition. Thus, nostalgia for family food or food eaten during a person’s youth has set in:⁶ this is the food which makes up the personality and identity of each individual. The current aspirations reflect this nostalgia, this wish to rediscover one’s culinary roots, the symbolics of “*a return to the past*”. There is a return to the basic product, a culinary return to the nature of things, to the natural and vegetal, and also to health food or medicinal food which expresses a concern for a well-balanced body. Everything functions as if gastronomy consisted in a search for a “*truth*” in foodstuffs, the “*essence*” of dishes or products.

For the city dweller, gastronomy and the products which are said to be “*traditional*” or “*local*” seem to constitute a rupture with his daily and usual way of eating as well as an escape into both the real and the imaginary worlds. Modernity and its food crisis play a part in the current strength of representations which are linked to the land and the local gastronomic particularities.

In this way, by breaking away from the everyday way of eating, holidays seem like a time of escapism and compensation by enabling the partaker of food to be part of a new cultural universe. The following analysis attempts to examine the relationships that exist between tourism and local gastronomy and identifies the gastronomic component that is inherent to the tourist experience.

2. THE CULTURAL APPROPRIATION OF THE “FOOD-LOVING TOURIST”

“The tourist is not only an onlooker in movement. . . He communicates personally with the area visited through a few simple words and ceremonial greetings exchanged with the local people. . . By buying a few symbolic objects known as souvenirs . . . , as if by magic, he appropriates Spain or Italy. Finally, he consumes the physical being of the country visited in the gastronomical meal, a cosmophagous rite which is more and more common”⁷. At a time when travelling and mobility no longer seem to be social variants, when they seem to be

⁶ ASSOULY O., *Les Nourritures nostalgiques, essai sur le mythe du terroir*, Actes Sud, Arles, 2004.

⁷ The original text reads : « Le touriste n’est pas seulement un spectateur en mouvement . . . Il communique personnellement avec la contrée visitée, par quelques mots élémentaires et salutations cérémonielles échangées avec les indigènes . . . Par quelques achats d’objets symboliques, dits souvenirs . . . , il s’approprie magiquement l’Espagne ou l’Italie. Enfin, il consomme l’être physique du pays visité, dans le repas gastronomique, rite cosmophage de plus en plus répandu ». MORIN E., *L’esprit du temps*, Paris, Grasset, 1962.

more and more democratized and integrated into the life of each individual, tourism and food remain closely linked. Before examining the nature of this link by associating rural tourism and gastronomy, it would seem interesting to study its origin and evolution.

The origin of the coupling of rural tourism and local gastronomy

In his historical analysis of the emergence of French regional cooking, J. Csergo⁸ brings to the fore gastronomy as a cultural consumption of local space, and perceived the culinary aspect, as early as the end of the nineteenth century, as being one of its “assets” that already included postcards, novels set in the region, and geographical itineraries.

We had to wait until the 1920s with the start of touring by car which encouraged the discovery of local areas for “gastronomic tours” to begin and develop, and for “gastronomads”, as Curnonsky⁹ called them, to appear. In 1921 Curnonsky together with Marcel Rouff began publishing a gastronomic guide symbolizing the “Holy Alliance of Tourism and Gastronomy” (*Sainte Alliance du tourisme et de la gastronomie*)¹⁰. In the style of an initiatory journey, the two journalists undertook a *Gastronomic Tour de France* which enabled them to list the culinary wealth of rural France. “*The monumental edifice, natural curiosity, the countryside and the local glory are simply truffles, foie gras, capons or fatted chickens*”¹¹. *The Michelin Guide* which began in 1901 as a result of the encounter between the car industry and leisure activities was first reserved to motorists and was presented in the form of a dictionary of local places and listed Michelin outlets, garages and also places of interest, routes and restaurants where you could break your journey. The famous red guide became the reference book of French gastronomy, gradually distributing stars to the best restaurants. From the 1920s *the Blue Guides* also began their gastronomic section. In 1913 *La France pittoresque et artistique* (“Picturesque and Artistic France”), a series of regional tourist guides, described a whole range of local features where restaurants and gastronomy figured predominantly.

From then on, commentaries, guides and itineraries concerning regional gastronomy gained considerable notoriety by conferring a new legitimacy on everything local through tourism. Also, on account of the action of hoteliers, restaurant owners, gastronomic associations (the Association des Gastronomes Régionalistes was set up in 1923), and

⁸ CSERGO J., « L'émergence des cuisines régionales », in FLANDRIN J.-L. et MONTANARI M. (collectif), *Histoire de l'alimentation*, Paris, Fayard, 1996.

⁹ Maurice Edmond Sailland dit CURNONSKY (1872-1956) : « prince élu des gastronomes ». He was a chronicler and famous cookery writer.

¹⁰ The expression of Simon Arbellot of the « Académie des Gastronomes ».

¹¹ The original text reads : « L'édifice monumental, la curiosité naturelle, le paysage et la gloire locale ne sont que truffes, foie gras, chapons ou poulardes ». CSERGO J., op.cit.

regionalist movements, regional gastronomy and its role within tourism gradually became expressions of a new national model. The following paragraph will attempt to analyze how, by incorporating and assimilating products that come from the soil, from the land, from local and rural know-how, the “*food-loving tourist*” finds a place of entrenchment which is both physiological and symbolic, and outside that of his daily eating habits in its gastronomic composition.

The gastronomic experience as a reflection of local identities

Gastronomy has pride of place in the tourist quest. It is a component of a tourist’s stay and a constituent of the meaning given to a location. A meal and its elements reinforce the process of identification and distancing during a trip or stay. It can be through that or because of that that we become attached to, or reject a place. J. Pavageau describes the place of food in travel. He writes that what is imagined about food is part of “*the complex alchemy which mobilizes the individual for a possible project of mobility, punctuates the stages of the future trip with strong images, enters into the very organization of the trip and is an integral part of the tourist practices*”¹². Imagined, consumed, incorporated and, in some cases, taken back home, the gastronomic product represents the cultural aspect and identity of the region visited.

If the act of tourism is situated outside a standardized daily order, the consumption of “*local*” gastronomic produce plays a role in this rupture by inviting the tourist into a new food universe. It is situated outside his usual habits and enables him to be involved in understanding his food history, even if it is transitorily. Holidays are privileged moments when daily food habits, which are sometimes associated with a diet or restriction, can be forgotten. In addition, the “*food-loving tourist*” or the consumer behaves as if, by getting closer to the product he has greater control over it and greater knowledge of it. In the act of buying products in farmers’ markets or at the roadside or eating on the spot, the consumer has the impression he has broken free of market rules and bypassed the commercial chain.

One of the very first acts of integration that is generally displayed when one is elsewhere, outside one’s usual environment, is eating. Partaking of the food of another group, taking on its food habits, is not this the means of entering into contact with, and appropriating, another culture? Eating the food or gastronomic specialities of a region visited and also adopting its table manners constitute a step towards understanding, apprehending and adopting the cultural practices of others.

¹² The original text reads : « à l’alchimie complexe qui mobilise l’individu pour un éventuel projet de mobilité, ponctuée d’images fortes les étapes du futur voyage, entre dans l’organisation même du parcours et fait partie intégrante des pratiques touristiques ». PAVAGEAU J., « Imaginaire alimentaire, projet de voyage et pratiques touristiques », in POULAIN J.-P. (ed.), *Pratiques alimentaires et identités culturelles*, Actes du colloque Le Patrimoine gastronomique du Vietnam, Etudes Vietnamiennes, Hanoi, 1997.

The meal and the way of behaving at the table integrate the tourist in the culture of the other by making him absorb the cultural codes physiologically and psychologically. If the tourist experience constitutes the consumption of multiple symbols and representations, eating is also a symbolic act and carries a cultural meaning. Thus, *“eating like the locals”* leads to the social integration of the tourist within the host group. On the contrary, refusing the food of the other can appear as a form of rejection and exclusion. Eating regional specialities *“on the spot”*, eating *“elsewhere”* and *“differently”* conveys a partnership with the place, a way of entering into the intimacy of the place and its people, and partaking symbolically of a land, a region, a province, its climate, its history and its landscape. *“How can one better appreciate a place, how can one establish a better partnership with it than by eating the fruit, thus literally, forming one body with it?”*¹³ In this way, food can reflect an inter-cultural encounter which is made up of individual and collective identities.

Certain tourist locations that are regarded as sacred, and sometimes termed *“the best places”* can be gastronomic. They are places which must not be missed, *“culinary centres”* which are emblematic and reveal the identity and culture of a given area. The selection of more than a hundred remarkable sites of quality established in France since 1994 by the ministries responsible for agriculture, tourism, culture and the environment authenticates this wealth and corroborates the sacred dimension given to gastronomy. These sites must have both tourist attractions and gastronomic appeal: they are considered as collective meeting points, common references, places of pilgrimage for *“food-loving tourists”* who are in search of reconciliation with food. These top gastronomic places are part of the ritual of a trip and are dotted on tourist routes.

Another dimension which is part of the tourist ritual is the purchase of a souvenir, a souvenir to be taken home at the end of a trip. In this way, the *“souvenir”* becomes the material link between the place where one is and elsewhere. It is the proof, the guarantee of an experience that was different as it diffuses its aromas, images and flavours at home on return from holidays. *“His own home becomes a new elsewhere (the place he has returned from) and this elsewhere that has changed him . . . He tries to reduce the distance between the last trip (and the next one) magically”*¹⁴. A food or gastronomic souvenir remains very present in the tourist experience. Buying and taking back home, for example, local products (wines, farm produce) at the end of the holiday prolongs and consolidates the trip. They are

¹³ The original text reads : « Comment mieux apprécier un lieu, comment établir une meilleure connivence avec lui que d'en manger les fruits, faisant ainsi, au sens propre, corps avec lui ? » de la Soudière M., « Dis-moi où tu pousses . . . Questions aux produits locaux, régionaux, de terroir, et à leurs consommateurs », in Eizner N. (ed.), *Voyage en alimentation*, Paris, ARF-Éditions, 1995.

¹⁴ The original text reads : « Son chez lui devient un nouvel ailleurs (d'où il revient) et cet ailleurs qui l'a changé . . . Il cherche à réduire la distance entre ce dernier voyage (et le prochain) magiquement ». Urbain J.-D., *L'idiot du voyage, Histoires de touristes*, Paris, Plon, 1993.

part of the tourist's psychological return: reproducing a recipe at home, and eating what is eaten elsewhere in one's daily universe reactivate the sensations of the holidays, recall them, and commemorate them. The smell of the product, its flavor and its taste help to reintroduce the memory of elsewhere. Through a food product brought back as a souvenir, the holiday world penetrates into the everyday world. Like a revered, sacred object, the gastronomic souvenir that is shared and enjoyed with friends can also prolong the act of distinction and social differentiation.

What is imagined in food and in tourism remain closely linked today. The food elements and *"local"* gastronomy more specifically, in their relationship with the place and product, play a part in the construction of the tourist experience, and the gastronomic souvenir taken home contributes to prolonging the holiday. In addition, what is imagined at a particular moment and linked to the countryside summons up the tourist experience in the same way as the gastronomic experience. Indeed, the myth of what is natural, the cult of the past and the search for social links refer as much to the image of present rural life as to its gastronomy. Thus, regional gastronomy could play the role of a federating component in rural tourism on which a range of aspirations and images would converge and rest¹⁵. That is how *"purifying"* and *"therapeutic"* images linked to the countryside are found in the consumption of and search for *"healthy"*, *"natural"* products that are likened to forms of corporal and spiritual therapy (physiological and psychological incorporation). The *"socializing"* and *"unifying"* images associated with rural life join the social dimension of meals and regional gastronomy; these symbolize a belonging to a social group, collective values, and sources of social cohesion. The success of meals shared in Bed and Breakfasts in farms or around communal tables seems to be the expression of a desire to communicate around food, and goes back to a sort of nostalgia for meals eaten together around the table. The *"conservative"* and *"nostalgic"* dimensions which finally nourish what is imagined of rural life convey a search for *"rustic"*, *"maternal"*, *"ancestral"* products and recipes which are marked by history and memory.

¹⁵ BESSIERE J., *Valeurs rurales et Imaginaire touristique*, in AMIROU R., BACHIMON P., *Le tourisme local, une culture de l'exotisme*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2000.

