Leaves #10
L'ensemble des métadonnées est accessible en cliquant sur le lien suivant :
http://dx.doi.org/10.21412/leaves_1001

Introduction

Magali Fleurot et Nathalie Jaëck

Food is a very adequate object for pluridisciplinary scrutiny. To borrow from Marcel Mauss, a French sociologist, food can be considered "a total social fact" in the sense that "behaviours and products [are] so tightly woven into the social order that society cannot be imagined without them" (Mauss 144). Food opens up to history, geography, sociology, gender, politics, medicine, education, urban and rural planning and also of course to the vast field of cultural studies and the history of representation. Though taste is described as eminently personal—both in popular proverbs, "One man's meat is another man's poison," and in John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty*: "A man's taste is how much his own peculiar concern as his opinion or his purse" (78)—food is also and crucially a common historical inheritance, a very telling entrance to a culture, a matter of national cohesion, identity and pride, a definite cultural, social and national marker, as well as a multiple challenge for societies. In the 16th century, the Sumptuary Laws which had, at various times in history and in different places, been used to control people's consumption of food and/or clothes, were revived in both Catholic and Protestant countries. It was an attempt at regulating who ate what and in what quantity, sometimes according to people's rank in society but more often than not it was aimed at the whole population, going as far as to prescribe how many guests one should invite at one's wedding. Such an intrusion into the personal bore religious motivations since gluttony was seen by the Catholic church as a sin, all the more terrible as it was thought as the first step towards the committing of another capital crime: that of lust. Indeed, consuming too much meat had the effect of increasing the amount of blood in the body—according to the Galenic theory of humours which experienced a revival during the Reformation. That blood, when in excessive quantities, was thought to convert into sperm and thus to lead to carnal greed, in a "typical association of gluttony, meat eating and illicit sexuality" (Moyer 68). Some states also had economic reasons to limit the quantities of food absorbed by people at banquets as their goal was to avoid food shortages and price inflation of certain foodstuffs like sugar which was getting very popular and consumed in the form of recently-adopted sweet desserts and confectionary (Moyer). Educating the populations was also an important concern as learning about table manners and not gorging on endless courses or eating with sobriety were ways of showing how unrelated man was to other animals and how civilized a façade he presented.

In countries where the dominant culture is Christian, the link between religion and food has slackened since the Enlightenment and food has, to the French at least, become very much an end in itself, a source of pleasure, and not a means to the attainment of purity or religious sanctity. On the other hand, it has entered the realm of the political. There is no denying that, even when they concern the food sphere, decisions taken by contemporary governments are political. The dominant logics of productivism and profitability while giving the impression of working for the greater good, do clash with what is good at an individual level. There are no more Sumptuary laws prohibiting excess meat consumption but strong injunctions to eat less beef to satisfy the eco-political agenda endorsed by the loud majority. Or as the case may be, to keep on consuming meat in a sensible way to keep in the good books of some agricultural lobbies.

French food also started to be culturally evocative when France could boast that special status in Europe which, from the 17th to the 19th century, enabled it to impose both its language and its cuisine. The French tongue being that of the European elites not only exported the vocabulary of cooking but also the techniques and the recipes. The French state was also very early politically centralised and existed as such at a much earlier date than other European countries (Parkhurst Ferguson). No doubt that Italian cuisine, for example, does not compare unfavourably to French cuisine but the Italian nation was only born as such in the 19th century. Before that date, its cooking remained regional and if there were Sicilian or Piedmonts identified cuisines, there was no Italian version of the French culinary reputation.

This reputation which continues unchanged to this day—in people's general idea of what France is—did not go entirely unresisted as the relationship with Great Britain exemplifies. From the Roast Beef of Olde England painted by William Hogarth in 1748 to the Mad Cow scandal in the 1990s, the Britons have opposed their own culinary culture. The example of those two countries, two traditional best enemies that do not always hold their respective gastronomies in immense respect, highlights the fact that within the context of a global economy and internationalisation, food remains highly territorialized, and representations about food bring to the fore national specificities and politics. Food is often seen as an emblem of personal and national identity, and Brillat-Savarin coined there the ultimate phrase: "Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you who you are" (15). Not only as an individual but as someone coming from a specific place: it says a lot about where you are from. That national food should be seen as a materialisation of national character is often illustrated in literature and the arts and the immemorial competition between Britain and France often continues at table, proving that there is just as much pleasure in the eating as there is relish

in disparaging the food of others. The long-standing and stereotypical views of French and English cooking seen through each other's patriotic eyes shows that cooking becomes by metonymic and metaphoric extension a view of the French and the English themselves, who love to pretend they are literally "indigestible" to each other. In 20th century French cookbooks, the best game was said to be found in France while their British equivalents boasted that the best beef was English. This taste for competition culminated in a way in the judicial ring when France came up with a protectionist idea to stave off copycats and to make sure some products remained French and French only: the AOC (Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée). It is no accident that it was France who "invented" the concept as it shows that "food is place" (Parkhurst Ferguson 13). Not only can camembert cheese only come from Normandy—so the theory goes—but the milk-producing cows must have grazed in the same region. Not only are the places of production germane to the locality argument here but the products themselves become woven into the mythology of nations, social classes, even religious groups. The Slow Food association has understood that very notion when it tries to protect specific, very little-known products or know-hows, and prevent their fall into oblivion. Because they are the soul of a place and a people, even if they do not weigh much in the global food business. That is not our concern here but there is a difference between the food that feeds the body and that which feeds the heart and soul of a community.

That is also why governments will always fail in the diets that they are trying—rightly or not—to impose on their populations. The whole developed world has heard of the Five Fruit and Vegetables a Day injunction coming from the WHO and which was then translated in each country and endorsed by each government. However, little effect has come from this precept for the simple reason that it has no cultural roots and does not connect people to what they know: it is the same normative exhortation whether you are in France or in Scotland. And yet people have very different ways of viewing food in those two places. Traditions, eating habits and even cooking rituals are overlooked and thus fail miserably in their mission to "teach" people how to eat (Allen 209). If obesity is a contemporary issue, it is because people have always known how to eat but have only recently been assaulted by the siren songs of the ultra-liberal and aggressive agribusiness promises. Recently, the Five Fruit and Vegetables became the Five Colours a day, proving that people are seen as children that do not understand what is asked of them, and there is still no understanding of the fact that it is food that is the subject here and that it is culturally loaded.

In the articles gathered in this issue on food representations in France and in Great Britain, the question of culture is paramount as well as the way it has come to embody how we view our relations to others. Rémy Duthille shows how toasting in 18th century sociability clubs

encouraged bonding and group formation. At the time, the drinks themselves could connect as well as estrange people since they were strong social markers. It is still pretty much the case today when wine connoisseurs use a jargon which can be perceived by some as a way of excluding the non-initiated. The socio-economic resonance of certain drinks is also exposed in this issue by Anne-Lise Marin-Lamellet who takes us to the cinema to show how beer and the pub are shown on screen as very telling markers of homosociality and masculine entertainment at least until the 1990s. She also very convincingly points out the class contempt surrounding the rising obesity which middle-class citizens see as a lack of will on the part of working-class people. Class also comes into play in the writing of the cookbooks described by Béatrice Laurent in her article on the female authors of those recipe collections. The very erudite scientific discourse employed in some of them was obviously destined to the higher classes in Victorian society and were there to drive home the current stereotypes on class and race. Other types of prejudice were rampant at the same time about the French who seem to have been considered wrongly as horse-eating barbarians by the British who, according to Sylvain Leteux, associated the whole population to the practice when it was in fact quite reduced to certain areas of France and certain sections of society. It goes to show how disgust is a profoundly difficult feeling to overcome, particularly when it concerns a whole culture. It became particularly conspicuous when the horse-gate scandal revealed that some lasagne industrial producers had tampered with their product to the point of adding horse flesh to the ready-made product. Such an issue, which is down to how much trust we put in our European and even global agri-business, reminded consumers of the sadly famous "mad cow" scandal which is exposed by Richard Davis as more than just a food scandal. It was linked to decades of mistrust between some countries, namely France and Great Britain and to how politicians seem to be ready to hide potential noxious substances in order to protect a flourishing industry. Last but not least, Karl-Heinz Wüstner brings to light an inspiring and little-known episode in the history of Great Britain: that of the German butchers who developed quite successful pork-selling shops, thereby influencing the eating habits of the local population.

Whether past or present, redolent of a positive or more challenging vision of society, the questions examined here all bear witness to the incredible richness of the debate around food.

Works cited

Allen, John S. *The Omnivorous Mind*. Harvard UP, 2012.

Brillat-Savarin, Jean-Anthelme. *The Physiology of Taste*. Translated by M. F. K. Fisher, Everyman's Library, 2009.

Mauss, Marcel. *A General Theory of Magic*. 1902. Translated by Robert Brain, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.

Mill, John Stuart. *On Liberty*. 1859. E-book, Batoche Books, 2001.

Moyer, Johanna.B. "'The Food Police': Sumptuary Prohibitions on Food in the Reformation." *Food and Faith in Christian Culture*, edited by Ken Albala and Trudy Eden, Columbia University Press, 2011.

Parkhurst Ferguson, Priscilla. *Word of Mouth, What We Talk About When We Talk About Food*. University of Columbia Press, 2014.