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The Taste of Terroir in “The Gastronomic Meal of the French”: France’s Submission to UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage List

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Abstract

Introduction

What French food is would seem to be an unproblematic idea. Depending on one’s taste and familiarity, a croissant, or snails, might spring to mind. Those who are a little more intimate with French cuisine might suggest the taste of a *coq au vin* or *ratatouille*, and fewer still might suggest *tarte flambée* or *cancoillotte*. Whatever the relative popularity of the dish or food, the French culinary tradition is arguably so familiar and, indeed, loved around the world that almost everyone could name one or two French culinary objects. Moreover, as the (self-proclaimed) leader of Western cuisine, the style and taste epitomised by French cuisine and the associated dining experience are also arguably some of the most attractive aspects of French gastronomy. From this perspective, where French cuisine appears to be so familiar to the non-French, seeking to define what constitutes a French meal could seem to be an inane exercise. Nonetheless, in 2010, the Mission Française du Patrimoine et des Cultures Alimentaires (not officially translated), under the aegis of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, put forward the nomination file “The Gastronomic Meal of the French” to UNESCO, defining in clear terms a particular image of French taste, in a bid to have the meal recognised as part of the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

With the number of specifically culinary elements protected by UNESCO more than doubling with the 2013 session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, and with a further two in line for protection in the 2014 session, it would seem that an examination of these protected culinary traditions is in order. Rather than focusing on the problems associated with creating an intangible heritage list (Kurin; Smith and Akagawa), this article proposes an analysis of one nomination file, “The Gastronomic Meal of the French,” and the ideas which structure it. More specifically, this article will investigate how the idea of taste is deployed in the document from two different yet interconnected points of view. That is, taste as the faculty of discerning what is aesthetically excellent, and taste in its more literal gustative sense. This study will demonstrate how these two ideas of taste are used to create a problematic notion of French culinary identity, which by focusing on the framework of local (*terroir*) taste seeks to define national taste. By specifically citing local food stuffs (*produits du terroir*) and practices as well as French Republicanism in the formation of this identity, I argue that the nomination file eschews problems of cultural difference. As a result, “non-French food” and the associated identities it embodies, inherent in contemporary multicultural societies such as France with its large immigrant population, are incorporated into a cohesive, singular, culinary identity. French taste, then, is represented as uniform and embodied by the shared love of the French “art of good eating and drinking”.

“Intangible” Versus “Tangible” Cultural Heritage: A Brief Overview

The Intangible Cultural Heritage list was created to compliment UNESCO’s Tangible Cultural Heritage, that is, the famous World Heritage, list, which focuses on places of unique heritage. The Intangible Cultural Heritage list, for its part, concentrates on:

traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts (“What is Intangible Cultural Heritage?”)

An examination of the elements which have been admitted to UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage shows that there is a clear preference for traditional dances and songs. The culinary plays a very small role in the almost 300 elements currently protected by UNESCO. With the recent inscription of several additional, specifically culinary elements in December 2013, the number has more doubled but still remains low at ten elements. Out of the ten, only two of them seek to protect a cooking style: the “Mediterranean Diet” and “Traditional Mexican cuisine—ancestral, ongoing community culture, the Michoacán paradigm.” The other elements are specific culinary objects, such as Gingerbread from Northern Croatia, or culinary events, for instance the “Commemoration feast of the finding of the True Holy Cross of Christ in Ethiopia.” “The Gastronomic Meal of the French” belongs to the latter category, however is somewhat different since it is not an annual event and can take place at any time of the year as it is not related to a season or historical event.

What really distinguishes the French document from the others on the list, however, is its emphasis on the idea of taste, which connects it to a long history of writing about taste in French cuisine, including of course Brillat-Savarin’s *Physiology of Taste*. In order to describe exactly what constitutes “The Gastronomic Meal of the French,” the authors refer frequently to two coextensive conceptions of taste, proposing that the taste of the meal is both a question of flavor and the aesthetic qualities of the diner as a whole. Whilst these ideas concerning the place of taste in French gastronomy appear to share numerous similarities to those elaborated in Brillat-Savarin’s work, I will focus on the way the conceptions of taste discussed in the dossier are used to formulate French identity.

Taste: An Aesthetic Judgment, An Art

When considering “The Gastronomic Meal of the French,” the closeness of the two ideas of aesthetic taste and gustative taste is perhaps clearer in French: the French verb *dresser* can be used to describe setting the table, an important aspect of the gastronomic meal, and arranging food on a plate. This link to aesthetics is important and in the nomination file the Gastronomic Meal of the French is taken as representative of the height of the French “art of good eating and drinking.” In the terms of the document the authors define the meal as “a festive meal bringing people together for an occasion to enjoy the art of good eating and drinking” (“Nomination file” 3). In evoking art here, they stress the importance that aesthetics play in the design of this meal. For them, the culinary art of the gastronomic meal involves both aesthetic and gustative concerns, since in order for the guests to savour the meal, the hosts must think as much about the delectability of their dishes as the classic French taste they must demonstrate in their table decoration and discussion about the food which they prepare. The participants’ conversation about the food during the meal and their comportment at the table are important elements of this taste, since they reinforce and aestheticize the dining experience. Moreover, both the host and guests must use “codified gestures” and certain expressions to discuss what they are eating and drinking so as to display by means of specific vocabulary that they are enjoying the meal (5). The art of conversation, then, is important in accomplishing one of the goals of the gastronomic meal, that being to share “the pleasure of taste” (8).

The nomination file lists the gastronomic meal’s specific rites as involving the “setting [of] a beautiful table, the order of courses, food and wine pairing, [and] conversation about the dishes” (3). By listing these elements in this order, the authors highlight that aesthetic and gustative concerns are interrelated and equally important. What is more, just as the decoration of a table and conversing about the dishes could be seen to be arts in the largest sense of the term, so too should “the order of the courses” and the “food and wine pairing” be understood to be a question of aesthetic judgment. In other words, the role of these rites in the gastronomic meal is as much to reinforce the sophisticated aesthetics of the hosts’ meal as to delight the taste buds of the guests.

The prominent role of the aestheticization of taste in the gastronomic meal is made even clearer elsewhere in the document when the authors specify how the table should be laid for a gastronomic meal. They write that this should be done according to the:

classic French taste, based on symmetry that fans out from the centre and including a tablecloth, artistically folded napkins, objects whose shapes are appropriate for each course and designed to enhance tastes; and, depending on the circumstance, between two and five glasses, several plates and utensils, and sometimes a

written menu. (5)

Here the aesthetics of the table are not simply meant to be appreciated visually, but supposed to support and “enhance tastes”. The two forms of taste, then, are clearly complementary ingredients in the successful hosting of a gastronomic meal and hosts should pay equal attention to both. The authors state that the extra care paid to the aesthetics of the meal is meant to honour the guests and differentiate the meal from a standard, everyday meal (5). Since the two ideas of taste intersect, it naturally follows that the choice of the culinary products for the meal also contributes to the goal of creating a special dining experience.

Taste as Gustative Experience, The Terroir

For the authors, the French palate is not unified by a canon of specific dishes, but a shared “vision of eating well” (3). This collective vision encompasses several different ideas, including the structure of the meal, the recipes used and the choice of products. Just as with the aesthetic concerns above regarding table arrangements, the authors are quite particular about the configuration of the meal. For them, the gastronomic meal must respect the same structure:

beginning with the *apéritif* (drinks before the meal) and ending with liqueurs, containing in between at least four successive courses, namely a starter, fish and/or meat with vegetables, cheese and dessert, the courses possibly numbering five or six depending on the occasion. (5)

The structure of the meal is supposed to highlight the quality of the good products that the host has obtained and exhibit how their flavours go well together (5). In terms of the exact recipes used in the meal, the host might call upon a “repertoire of codified recipes” (3) in order to honour the shared “vision of eating well”. So deeply ingrained is this shared vision in the French psyche that the authors do not need to specify what the recipes are, and even go so far as to claim that the unknown list is “constantly growing” (5). This undefined catalogue of recipes and shared “vision of eating well,” then, arguably represent a banal form of national culinary identity, since these culinary practices constitute a “form of life, which is daily lived” (Billig 69) by the nation without being specified.

More important than the recipes, however, is the “search for good products” (3). The hunt for good products begins with seeking out “local food products available at markets [...] since they have a high cultural value” (6). The authors argue that the importance attached to these products symbolises the French commitment to non-standardised food products and “quality in terms of taste, nutrition and food safety” (6). The height of gustative taste is represented by the use of these local food products (*produits du terroir*) since they provide evidence of the hosts’ “knowledge of the characteristics of local production areas” (2). Just as above with the aesthetic concerns of the meal, when discussing one idea of taste, the other is never far away. In this case, the hosts’ knowledge of the local products, used in crafting the gustative experience, is meant to contribute the art of conversation which takes place during the meal. The hosts’ gustative and aesthetic tastes are on display and under analysis at every point in the meal.

For the authors of the nomination file, then, French gustative taste is ruled by the idea of *terroir*. Successfully holding a gastronomic meal means that the hosts must be intimately familiar with France’s geography and the local products of France and use this knowledge to choose the right products. All of these very specific ideas concerning the aesthetic and gustative tastes illustrated in the document, then, raise interesting questions about inclusion and exclusion in the notion of French culinary identity they embody.

Whose Taste Is It?

So far I have argued that taste is the central preoccupation of the nomination file, which governs both aesthetic and gustative choices a host makes when organizing and holding a gastronomic meal. This discussion has elided some of the questions raised by the document’s definitions of taste, most notably the problem of whose taste is defined by the document. One possible response to this question is provided in quite clear terms by the document itself, when the authors talk about the antecedent of the current meal. For them, the meal evolved out of the values exemplified by “the high-society meal, transmitted through revolutionary France [and which] inspired working-class practices” (5). This reference to revolutionary French values reveals how the authors’ arguments about taste are informed by the values of the French Republic, a powerful notion in discussions about French national identity. As numerous critics have contended, the status of France as a republic significantly impacts on how national identity is constructed (McCaffrey), since it is conceived of through the idea of citizenship. Put simply, being a French citizen means that, for the state, one’s position as a citizen takes precedence over any cultural particularisms or clan and family solidarities (Jennings). To put it another way, whilst the individual person displays specificities, the citizen demonstrates the universal values held by all citizens of the French state (Schnapper). Citizenship is a political matter and any aspect of one’s private life is irrelevant to the state’s treatment of its citizens. In ignoring any particularisms that a citizen may have, French Republicanism seeks to universalise all values held by its citizens, simultaneously providing a common shared identity and a means to exclude anyone who fails to commit to these ideals. As Jennings has pointed out elsewhere, these Republican ideals have an interesting effect on how one considers French national identity in the contemporary diverse society that is France, since “despite an astonishing level of cultural and ethnic diversity, France has seen itself as and has sought to become a monocultural society” (575).

In terms of the French culinary practices discussed here the associated problems with French Republicanism are clear, for such a “mono-culinary” representation of French foodways would potentially lead to significant portions of the population being left out of any such definition. Given the document’s reference to the Republic, the universalizing force displayed in the nomination file cannot simply be considered the result of the structure of UNESCO’s bureaucratic file, but should instead be understood as the expression of French Republican ideas of identity. Here it is the quality of local ingredients (*produits du terroir*) which characterise the universal pleasure of taste and the appreciation of local farming practices (*terroirs*) that the authors seek to elevate in the face of any imported tastes concurrently practised in France.

The fact that the universal claims made in the French document are specific to it, and not inherent of UNESCO’s form, is evident when examining other nomination files, such as the traditional Mexican cuisine dossier. Whilst the Mexican dossier argues that the cuisine offers a “comprehensive cultural model” (4), its authors talk instead of communities whose identities display “distinct yet shared features, all of them together [making] for a flourishing cuisine throughout the country” (12). The Mexican file, thus, recognises that diversity is an integral part of its culinary model. For the French dossier, on the other hand, the Republican ideas are made patent by the authors’ insistence upon the homogenous nature of these culinary practices and tastes. They assert, for instance, that the meal is a “very popular practice, with which all French people are familiar” (3); that it displays a “homogeneity in the whole community” (3); that it embodies a “social practice [...] associated with a shared vision of eating well” (3); and that it is part of a “shared history and that it carries the values on which French culture is based” (5). The authors also reference a small survey to support this supposition in which an incredible 95.7 per cent of respondents consider “the gastronomic meal to be part of their heritage and identity” (10). Furthermore they claim that the gastronomic meal

transcends local customs, generations, social class and opinions, and adapts to religious and philosophical beliefs. Its values take in diversity and strengthen feelings of belonging for participants in the gastronomic meal. (5)

This quotation demonstrates the Republic’s ability to transform the particular into the general, the individual into citizen. Here this transformative ability is seen in the authors’ assertion that the Gastronomic Meal of the French cuts across “local customs” and “social classes” to bring people together and reinforce the sense of a united nation. With this insistent discourse that the meal is unanimously accepted, understood, and practised by the entire nation, despite one’s particularisms, the authors of the file demonstrate how they seek to universalise the meal. The meal should no longer be considered as an object, for the authors seek to promote it to the status of a national myth which is deeply rooted in the national psyche, echoing the nation’s motto of “One Republic/cuisine united and indivisible for everyone.”

The Republican nature of the universal tastes represented in the document is further reinforced when the authors emphasise the role of the State and its education

system in ensuring that the right taste prevails. Just as many critics discussing the Republic regard the French education system's role as one which constructs citizens (Janey), equipping them with the appropriate national values, the authors of nomination file argue that good taste is of national significance and ought to be taught in the education system. For them, this taste should be imparted to students in primary schools by regularly preparing and consuming meals so as to instruct them in "the rites of the gastronomic meal, including the choice of the right products" (8). The idea of the right taste is further impressed upon students through the annual "Taste Week" in which "educational activities on nutrition and the development of taste [...] essential to maintaining the rites of the element [take place in schools]" (7). These activities include instruction in "the combining of flavours, pleasure of taste, choice of the right product, conversation and gastronomic discourse" (7). For those not at school, the "choice of the right product" (14) mentioned here is facilitated through yet another state sanctioned source of taste, the Inventory of Traditional Food and Agricultural Know-how.

Conclusion

The "Gastronomic Meal of the French" defines national culinary identity by combining several different ideas together. On one level, the authors draw together Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" and Michael Billig's notion of "banal nationalism." They argue that there exists a state approved, written form this identity which is intimately linked to the French Republic and its history (Anderson), whilst also contending that the food practices are so well-known that they are banal facets of everyday lived experience (Billig). On another level, they draw these assertions regarding national identity together through the notion of taste, which the authors stress is integral to French culinary identity. In terms of gustative taste, the preference for *terroir* in the document points to how the local is used as a "conduit toward national self-understanding" (Gerson 215). Yet this approach leads to a problematic relationship between local and national concerns, which ought to be seen as part of a larger issue concerning the link between Republican values and the disciplining of French culinary identity and space. What it is tempting to ask—and the present paper is just the beginning—is how do state sanctioned bodies, like the Mission Française du Patrimoine et des Cultures Alimentaires combined with brotherhoods (*confréries*) and local organisations mentioned in the nomination file as well as the system of *Appellations d'Origine Contrôlée*, come together to discipline French culinary identity and taste? The examination of the present document seems to suggest that Republican Universalism is one key ingredient in this act of discipline. The hesitation between asserting a cohesive, national culinary identity whilst at the same time recognising the "diversity of traditions foods and cuisines" (5), appears to be representative of the hesitation in political discourse apparent in the modern Republic. The tensions exposed in this document are being played out in the policies concerning decentralisation and recognition to a certain extent of regional minorities in France. As Schnapper puts it, the great problem which the Republic currently faces is how can the state reconcile "the absolute of citizenship—the Republic—with the legitimate expression of particularistic allegiances in conformity with democratic values" (quoted, Jennings 152). Ultimately, what "The Gastronomic Meal of the French" shows is how pertinent Republican ideas still are in France, since, despite claims of a crisis in Republican values and the current debates in French parliament, they remain important in any consideration of French identity, not only in the political spectrum, but also in everyday cultural objects like food.

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