UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Advancing Knowledge, Driving Change

Authenticity
Author(s): Allen S. Weiss
Source: *Gastronomica*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Winter 2011), pp. 74-77
Published by: University of California Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/gfc.2012.11.4.74
Accessed: 07-09-2018 14:13 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

University of California Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Gastronomica*

This content downloaded from 217.215.149.7 on Fri, 07 Sep 2018 14:13:22 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

point of view | allen s. weiss

Authenticity

Le savoir augmente les saveurs.
[Knowledge improves taste.]

"Authenticity" is a term all too often misused and abused in the popular press, and thoroughly distorted and maligned in the academic milieu. This leads to the peculiar situation that one of the most common terms in both gastronomic writing and the popular culinary imagination has been almost completely excised from academic discourse by an overzealous ideology critique. This conceptual blind spot arose because the topic suggests a valorization of origins, hierarchies, and certitudes, all anathema to postmodern critique. I wish to propose a reconsideration of the term that saves its descriptive and theoretical values from both a naive, unreflective, often reactionary popular usage and from a stultifying politically correct automatism on the part of many scholars. For I believe that we must beware of all manifestations of lexical policing, remain suspicious of those who are suspicious, and question the often debilitating censure of words. I offer the following preliminary thoughts not as a polemic but rather as a stimulus to discussion, for lack of dialogue on questions of authenticity is detrimental to culinary studies, as I shall attempt to show.[1]

Gastronomic authenticity is a "soft" concept, usually referring to the appropriateness of linking a specific ingredient, technique or recipe, or a relation between dishes or between a wine and a dish, to a particular time and place. Such is a function of differentiation and variation, as epitomized by the sempiternal and long stereotyped debates as to whether a cassoulet should be made with duck, goose, pork, or mutton according to whether it is cooked in Toulouse, Carcassonne, or Castelnaudary. It is evident that authenticity concerns how cultural identity is determined through cuisine, a state of affairs that often has more bearing on town pride than on culinary reality. To grasp the complexity of the issue, one might wish to consider, for example, the totality of the northern Mediterranean basin from Sicily to Galicia, across Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal, as a nearly continual series of culinary variations and transformations, just as it reveals a continual series of Latinate linguistic variations, changing not only from country to country (languages) and region to region (dialects) but from valley to valley (patois). In this context, identity concerns a series of differences that mark identities and is, thus, a function of distinctiveness of speech, recipes, landmarks, flora and fauna, etc.[2] The quest for identity often breeds polemic, and it is precisely the loose edges of the concept of authenticity, its openness and mutability, that make of it a polemical figure of discourse. The question is, whether such polemic is destined to freeze languages and recipes in time or to create new possibilities.[3]

Tradition without awareness of history and without possibility of change is mere stereotype, and innovation without consciousness of genealogy and situatedness is sheer experimentation.

What would constitute an authentic dish? The lexical scope of the term is both judgmental and descriptive, as is attested to by *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*: one ideological extreme is the definition "possessing authority that is not usually open to challenge," while the descriptive value is suggested by the gloss, "worthy of acceptance or belief by reason of conformity to fact or reality: not contradicted by evidence." While the common usage of "authentic" is most often judgmental and prescriptive, and the academic backlash dismissive and proscriptive,

GASTRONOMICA: THE JOURNAL OF FOOD AND CULTURE, VOL.11, NO.4, PP.74–77, ISSN 1529-3262. © 2011 BY ALLEN S. WEISS.

This content downloaded from 217.215.149.7 on Fri, 07 Sep 2018 14:13:22 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

here I wish to focus on its descriptive values. An acceptable usage may be explained in terms of a complex notion of site-specificity, whereby a recipe is inextricably linked to place, time, culture.[4] (We should remember that until the beginnings of industrialization in the early modern epoch, the majority of people were intimately familiar with the plants and animals that were to become their food. Most contemporary urban dwellers do not have this luxury, and the sense of authenticity serves in part as a form of overcompensation.) But the notion of site, in gastronomic terms what the French refer to as *terroir*, is complex. Consider the following broad schematization, which attempts to unpack *site* and *situatedness* in their gastronomic application:

- **in/out** (home, endo-cuisine/restaurant, exo-cuisine);
- **down/up** (peasant, domestic/bourgeoise, haute);
- **closed/open** (childhood, traditional/foreign, nouvelle);
- **small/large** (peasant/industrial);
- **here/there** (local, regional, national/cosmopolitan, exotic, hybrid);
- **before/after** (tradition, slow/innovation, fast).

These dualities do not represent binary oppositions but polarities that constitute the infrastructure of the culinary symbolic and determine the lineaments of site and authenticity.[5] (One fascinating exception to this analysis is the recent development of molecular cuisine, which is the first truly siteless style of cooking, though one wonders whether regional and national variants will be distinguishable over time.) By visualizing a grid or spreadsheet that incorporates all of these possibilities, the complexity of the notion of site becomes apparent. A parallel mental exercise is the combinatory grid of 77,760 stuffed cabbage variants that I established in *Autobiographie dans un chou farci*, a categorization that permits personal taste (or biases, as the case may be) to be situated and issues of authenticity determined.[6]

1. Authenticity exists ex post facto. It is not an indication of origins, but of configurations of cultural values. Jorge Luis Borges teaches that "The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future."[7] Each great work or style reconfigures our sense of past works according to present tendencies, such that we are consequently aware of new configurations, relations, correspondences. The same holds for the history of cuisine where, like classicism in the arts, authenticity is formulated retrospectively on the basis of current premises. Tradition is a trajectory, and authenticity becomes a function of genealogy. Just as the notion of "landscape" has proven to be a set of urban values projected onto the countryside, so too does "authenticity" in gastronomic terms primarily indicate an urban appreciation of rural cuisine. Though landscape studies and gastronomy are obviously linked through the shared notion of *terroir*, the almost total neglect of the history of landscape and gardens in food studies, and inversely of cuisine in landscape history, makes one wonder about the relative insularity of these discourses.[8]

2. Authenticity is a figure of equivocation. It is not a discourse of truth, but of variation. Concerning commonplace culinary vocabulary, *authentic* should not be confused with *typical*, since the latter, as the word suggests, indicates nothing more than conformity to type. The typical is only a cross section of possibilities at a given moment of time (a synchronic analysis) and not a historical (diachronic) account. The fact that something is typical is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of it being authentic. One must avoid the risks of such generalization, as one must also eschew the fall into pure empiricism, which only permits consideration of particulars. For a recipe never consists of a single instantiation of a dish, but is rather a template for variation, with the slight nuances entailed in repetition. Thus, we would do well to investigate the history of cuisine according to the exigencies of set theory, narrative theory, and genre theory, so as to be able to discern the historical and symbolic forms of structural typicalities, psychological expectations, and social configurations. The

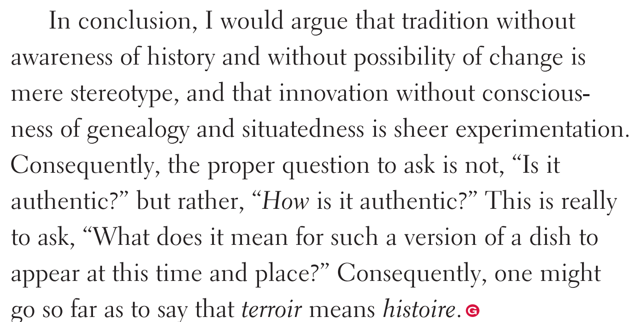
This content downloaded from 217.215.149.7 on Fri, 07 Sep 2018 14:13:22 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

notion of authenticity should not proffer a univocal and, thus, impoverished view of cuisine, but rather a plurality of meanings. Structuralist theory teaches that a myth consists of the sum total of all its variants, but that these variants have meaning only as they are manifested in specific situations, particular myths, defined rituals. One may say the same for a dish, the meaning of which is to be found through its variants, elucidated (cooked) in a particular time and place. Why does a dish appear at a given historical juncture? The reasons are no more or less complex than those behind any question of cultural causality: penury or plenty; the discovery of a new ingredient or the loss of a traditional one; change in climatic conditions; the arrival of a foreign chef; the idiosyncrasies of a native son or daughter; etc. Authenticity is, thus, a function of the intersection of all the above-mentioned polarities innate to site, where the tension between the poles (i.e., the "conflict" between culinary variants) is a source of gastronomic richness. This tension inflects variable uses: descriptive, prescriptive, proscriptive; indicating, classifying, naming. The limits of the possibility of an authentic dish are a set of variants of recipes—constantly revised, constantly shifting—distributed over a delimited geographic region. Above all, this sense of relativity suggests a rather humble attitude toward criticism and theory, though it must be stressed that such relativity is not a slippage into subjectivism, but a recognition of the groundedness and historicity of taste.

3. Authenticity is a dialogical figure. While issues of both taste and authenticity are equally conditioned by the dialogical imperative, we should remember that it is often the case that spurious judgments of taste undermine determinations of authenticity. It has long been known that wine and food socialize taste. Thus, taste is not a purely subjective judgment, but a function of conviviality. There are, of course, people with whom dialogue is impossible: the solipsist (egotistically positioned as the sole arbiter of taste) and the populist (for whom everybody's taste is equal), and their great weapon is the claim *de gustibus non est disputandum* (there is no disputing taste). One immediately encounters these difficulties in teaching aesthetics, where the fundamentally irrefutable claims—"I know what I like, and I don't care if it's beautiful," as well as "I like it; thus, it is beautiful," and its ultimate *reductio ad absurdum*, "Only what I like is beautiful"—are all, in fact, aesthetic judgments characterized by the refusal of dialogue and a lack of intellectual openness. I would argue, to the contrary, that taste is nothing if not disputable, polemical, dialogical. Is there any other reason, after all, for the vast proliferation of gastronomic journalism, history, and theory? Indeed, while taste defined as the physiological quality of sensation is not disputable, taste as aesthetic choice certainly is, and it is susceptible to the sundry analyses that have informed literary and cultural studies: genealogical, structural, rhetorical, psychological, historical, mythological, as all perceptive food writers from Brillat-Savarin through M.F.K. Fisher have pointed out. In order to ascertain the truth of an enunciation, one must always ask, as Friedrich Nietzsche insisted, "Who is speaking?" At issue in every evocation and evaluation of a meal is the degree of congruence of viewpoints: are we speaking to a group where a great degree of agreement obtains (such as the ideal of aesthetic harmony sought among guests in the Japanese tea ceremony), or at the other extreme, is there a contentious and polemical turn to the discussion (as in so much restaurant criticism, and in the very tone of the recent spate of "tell all" culinary autobiographies)?

4. Authenticity is a dynamic notion. The rigid use of the term would have it that the authentic dish is fixed in time, space, and form. However, a dish exists only in the context of all its variants over time and space. This suggests that every dish makes sense in several different manners, variously perceived within personal, local, regional, national, and global contexts. Spatially, authenticity is generally synonymous with *indigenous*, tantamount to a geographic and cultural delimitation; temporally, it is roughly synonymous with *traditional* and is, thus, permeated by history, which determines how a recipe changes over time. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that an ingredient need not be produced on site for it to be indigenous to a cuisine (salt is an almost universal example, and the tomato in Italian cuisine is among the most striking), nor that the introduction of new cooking techniques necessarily obviates the traditional aspects of cuisine, for many traditions began as innovations. Finally, we should remember in this regard that geographic determinants include how different a given foodstuff may taste according to the soil in which it is grown: the importance of *terroir* in wine discourse is a hyperbolic instance. In this regard, one should note that the commonplace phenomenon that certain wines "don't travel well" is rarely due to any physical change in the wine itself, but rather to the results of the wine being removed from its context. Not only is there the psychological effect of the loss of cultural surroundings when a wine is displaced from a local bistrot to a distant dining room, but even more important is the fact that in traditional winemaking regions wines have been vinified over the ages to accord with the local cuisine, a

This content downloaded from 217.215.149.7 on Fri, 07 Sep 2018 14:13:22 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms



harmony generally missing in another locale. The "authenticity" is not in the wine, but in its place, and it is true that many things taste best at the source, precisely because the culinary context is a totality that seeks affinities of local ingredients and recipes.[9]

In conclusion, I would argue that tradition without awareness of history and without possibility of change is mere stereotype, and that innovation without consciousness of genealogy and situatedness is sheer experimentation. Consequently, the proper question to ask is not, "Is it authentic?" but rather, "*How* is it authentic?" This is really to ask, "What does it mean for such a version of a dish to appear at this time and place?" Consequently, one might go so far as to say that *terroir* means *histoire*.

NOTES

These thoughts were developed in the following venues: "Entretiens del Duca" of the Mission Française du Patrimoine et des Cultures Alimentaires, Fondation Simone et Cino del Duca–Institut de France, Paris (June 2009); "Penser la nourriture, nourrir la pensée" colloquium, Université de Tours (September 2009); "Menus and the Media" lecture series at The Institute for Public Knowledge, New York University (April 2010); the Seminar on the History of Cuisine, FARO, Brussels (June 2010); and in my seminar on "Cuisine, Performance and the Arts," New York University (Spring 2011).

1. Among the major sources of this censure are Theodor W. Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964), a scathing critique of the postwar engagement with Heidegger's later philosophy, and Michel Foucault's analysis of what he termed the "philosophers of suspicion" (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud), which was taken up by the ethically oriented discourse of cultural studies.

2. I remember a trip to LaCoste in the Lubéron to photograph the ruins of the chateau of the Marquis de Sade. My guide, a poet who also wrote on the archaeology and topography of the region, reflected on the perpetual antagonism between the two facing hilltop towns of LaCoste and Bonnieux, claiming that one village was castigated as having the highest rate of madness in the country, while the other responded that its antagonist has France's highest divorce rate. True or not (probably not), it is certainly a more antagonistic means of determining identity than would be an Iron Chef competition.

3. One might wish to expand the analogy and suggest that, *mutatis mutandis*, the difference between peasant and haute cuisine is somewhat like that between colloquial usage and poetry, all the while understanding that everyday speech may well be poetic, and poetic speech banal.

4. Every discipline has a specific concept of site. In music, for example, the varied acoustics of concert halls and performance venues is crucial in relation to all performance, but most especially to organ music, since each pipe organ is unique and nontransportable, thus linked to a given site. The specificity of such acoustics impacts both the practical and the symbolic aspects of the music, since until the late nineteenth century most organs were built for churches, and consequently nearly all organ music was sacred.

5. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), is fundamental in this context.

6. See Allen S. Weiss, *Autobiographie dans un chou farci* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2006), 19–32; and "Reflections on the Stuffed Cabbage," *Gastronomica* 7, no. 1 (2007): 70–75.

7. Jorge Luis Borges, "Kafka and His Precursors" in *Labyrinths*, trans. Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 201. Borges' tale is a gloss on T.S. Eliot's notion of the retrospective establishment of literary tradition, which though at first glance is not intuitively obvious, is actually a key aspect of modern historiography, literary criticism, and philosophy. It is most notably evident in Nietzsche (where the goal of philosophy is to transform the self by willing to change one's own past so as to overcome *ressentiment*, which is defined as the ill will against the once-and-for-all linearity of time) and Freud (where the analytic situation is one in which the patient reinterprets or re-creates a past series of events in order to guarantee a cure). For those who wish to pursue this matter further, it is not without interest that the moment when Western philosophy and psychology began to imagine the transformation of the past coincided with the birth of cinema, where the first special effects included time reversal, accomplished by playing the filmstrip backward, thus modernizing the ancient rhetorical trope of the hysteron-proteron (reversal in time). One might go so far as to propose a fifth mode of causality to the Aristotelian model, that of the genealogical cause.

8. A notable exception is Michel Serres, *The Five Senses* (1985), especially his extraordinary discussion of the sense of taste illustrated by a description of a bottle of 1947 Chateau d'Yquem; his stress on how the very flavors of the earth itself are manifested in this wine is revealing. It is interesting that in the West the notion of *terroir* is normally limited to culinary matters, while in Japan it is a discourse that also informs the art of pottery, which is not only made from the earth (and is thus *a fortiori* site specific), but which is also profoundly related to the arts of the table. Late nineteenth-century philosophy had for the first time in the West offered a valorization of the earth, and consequently of the body, beginning with Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and going through Merleau-Ponty's *The Visible and the Invisible*, passing through Heidegger's late philosophy with its emphasis on dwelling. The vicissitudes of the symbolism of the earth in twentieth-century philosophy and literature may well offer some clues to the mythical and symbolic aspects of cuisine, especially regarding the recent valorization of peasant culture (ironically occurring at the very moment of its disappearance in the industrialized countries). It should be stressed that this reconsideration of the earth is one that is thoroughly imbued with history, standing in opposition to the mythic notions of earth and blood that have driven so much reactionary politics, and inspired so much conservative thinking about cuisine.

9. While crisp mountain air or a fresh sea breeze is obviously an excellent stimulus to appetite, it is a sad fact that most of the great wines of the world have been drunk, for over a half century, in air-conditioned rooms located in polluted cities. Consequently, the "charming little wines" that "don't travel well" have a better chance of being appreciated truly *in situ*.

This content downloaded from 217.215.149.7 on Fri, 07 Sep 2018 14:13:22 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms