



Food and the Imaginary Other

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The article considers a number of food-related topics and uses examples from a wide variety of sources, ranging from literary texts through journalistic articles to posts on the internet. Special attention is paid to “real” and imaginary food travels, which have become a fascinating topic of research in our time. Food controversies are also touched upon. It is argued that foreign foods may have mostly been a source of disgust in the past but have subsequently acquired symbolic capital and consuming them has come to be interpreted as a sign of sophistication. Also, food can be said to represent, in many ways, a new discursive currency, which may signal a desired or unwanted identity. In a lot of cases, however, the “original” of a particular food item may not exist and what is provided for consumption is a simulacrum. Cases of nostalgia for the food of the past are approached from this angle. Overall, the article aims at presenting the diverse cultural landscape of the present of which the food of the Other is an integral part.

Keywords: food, travel, authenticity, the Other, identity, memory, politics, nostalgia, simulacrum.

According to a book, published in 1847 and revealingly entitled *Illustrations of Eating; Displaying the Omnivorous Character of Man and Exhibiting the Natives of Various Countries at Feeding Time*, “that which is regarded as a luxury in one country is by its neighbour abhorred as loathsome” (Vasey 65). In the same treatise we read that “the native inhabitants of Greenland,” that is, the Inuit, might regale a visitor with a “part of a whale’s tail rendered soft and easy of digestion by being half putrid” as well as with “the flesh of bears, belugas, sharks, dogs, gulls, and bull-heads” (Vasey 26–27). The author further asserts that “[a]n Englishman is not easily persuaded to dine on snails with an Italian – on frogs with a Frenchman – on horse-flesh with a Tartar – or on monkey and lizard with a West Indian” (Vasey 65). As is very frequently the case with Victorian texts exploring and comparing cultural practices and cultural products, the book is frankly Anglocentric and exalts the virtues of English food. Consuming that food is apparently a mark of cultural superiority: significantly, the author claims that even in “various countries of *civilized* Europe the inhabitants use, as food, many substances, *the idea* of which would cause *disgust and loathing* in the more fastidious Englishman [my emphasis]” (Vasey 54). Clearly, he has mostly contempt for the food of the Other.

This article aims to highlight some recent changes in social attitudes and food-related practices as it sets out to explore perceptions of food in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It appears that food travels, both real and imaginary, have become a fascinating topic of research in our own time. But what is actually the place of the food of the Other in the cultural landscape of a globalizing world?

Needless to say, comments such as the ones presented above are not likely to occur in latter-day Anglophone newspaper or magazine articles on food and travel. Denigration of foreign food may be found in fictional texts, though, but in a lot of those it is often used as a means of alerting readers to the negative personality traits of particular literary characters. For instance, one of the stories in Julian Barnes’s collection *The Lemon Table* presents a woman who reads elaborate recipes to her husband as he descends into the depths of dementia. Here is the husband’s reaction:

“Pork Tenderloin with Mushrooms and Olives. Pork Chops Baked in Sour Cream. Braised Pork Chops Creole. Braised Devilled Pork Chops With Fruit.” “With fruit,” he’ll repeat,

making his face into a funny snarl, pushing out his lower lip. “*Foreign muck!*” He doesn’t mean it, of course. Or he didn’t mean it. Or he wouldn’t have meant it. Whichever one’s correct. (162)

In the age of “political correctness,” only clinically insane or deliberately rude people can afford to disapprove of the food of the Other so explicitly. Yet food has had a long history of animosity and division. Othering through food has long been a recurrent tendency in human societies and has shaped cultural attitudes for thousands of years. Even nowadays the smallest deviation from the established routine relating to food and meals is likely to result in branding a person or an entire group as alien or strange. Food discourse may mirror the “real” or perceived identity of an entire nation or ethnic group (see Perianova, “Food As a Paradigm”). What one eats is often perceived as revealing what one is like. Beliefs about the food of the Other often refer to stereotypes metonymically labelling national character and opposing it, for example, to those who consume “wholesome *English* food.” Thus, from an Anglocentric perspective, “frogs” is derogatory for the French, “pasta eaters,” for Italians, “krauts,” shortened from *Sauerkraut*, is a derogatory First and Second World War term for Germans. Across the Atlantic, Africans are caricatured as brand mascots for fried chicken (see Williams-Forsen 343–353). Spare ribs are also stereotyped as the quintessential food of African Americans, as illustrated by the following racist joke: “*Question*: How do we know Adam and Eve were not black? *Answer*: You ever try to take a rib from a nigger?” (Unijokes).

Food operates in a variety of political contexts. Thus, an exhibition organized by the Harry Ransom Centre and entitled *The World War, 1914–1918* (11 February – 3 August, 2014) showed Russian propaganda posters in which all countries involved in the First World War were personified as food. In the posters, Germany and Austria-Hungary are both portrayed as conniving sausages while Russia is portrayed as a hearty bowl of buckwheat *kasha*. While the “sausages” try in vain to consume the other countries, the “*kasha*” spills forth to overtake them. Staples such as onions and potatoes morph into crude caricatures of the Habsburg Emperor Franz Joseph and the German Kaiser Wilhelm and his sons, insisting that the evil of the Germans could only have grown in the garden of the devil himself. Another poster titled “Wilhelm’s Menu” replaces the expected food on the menu with violent actions against Wilhelm: showing him drowning, beaten and left broken and alone. Posters such as those served to call up negative associations through images of food and eating. The Russian *kasha*, on the other hand, is made up of figures of soldiers, and these are the only human characters on the poster.

Food controversies and culinary wars have long been a recurrent theme in nation-centric discourses. For instance, the Armenians and the Turks cannot agree on the origin of a popular dish called *keskek*, a porridge-like stew made of lamb or chicken and cooked in huge cauldrons, which is claimed by both nations. By the same token, it is frustrating to the nationals of many Balkan countries, who grew up believing that the powerful fruit brandy known variously as *rakia*, *raki*, *rakija*, *rachu*, etc., and produced from plums, apricots, peaches, figs or grapes, with or without aniseed, was their national drink. Frustratingly for some, that it is now a Slovenian brand name. Indeed, though by definition food is supposed to be conducive to peace, culinary disagreements seem to be as good a reason as any for international conflicts. In the Ukrainian city of Luhansk, for instance, the summer of 2014 saw the closure of McDonald’s restaurants by Russian-backed separatists. There were threats to blow up the premises if the restaurants went on operating without permission. Moscow followed suit lashing out at the MacDonal’d’s restaurants in the city and other places in the Russian Federation to signal that the west was not welcome there. Ostensibly, Russian McDonald’s restaurants were closed down for health reasons. But analysts are sceptical because Russia, as well as other countries, is known to have a tendency to ban foreign products, particularly food, for political reasons.

A haunting and harrowing portrayal of the links between food and politics is represented in *Cooking History*, a documentary by the Slovak director Peter Kerekes, which picked up a special jury prize at the documentary film festival in Toronto in May 2009. The film looks at major European conflicts of the twentieth century from the perspective of some often ignored but crucial figures in warfare: military chefs, such as Branko Trbović, who cooked and tested food for Josip Broz “Tito,” the late leader of what used to be Yugoslavia. Trbović tells of how different cultures’ foods were used aggressively to promote nationalist agendas at meetings ostensibly convened to discuss Yugoslav unity: the Croatian leader Franjo Tuđman served Dalmatian ham with olives and Croatian pot roast, while the Serb nationalist leader Slobodan Milošević offered

up a counter-meal of sour curds, Zlatibor cheese and Serbian polenta (see Trbović and Cosić 21). In such cases food stands for national identity, suggesting the deep significance that people attach to what they perceive as their *national* cuisines, even when their constituent foods do not appear markedly different from the ones that make up the cuisines of their neighbours.

In the same vein, in Poland eating an innocent apple has recently turned into a sign of symbolic protest against Russian sanctions proscribing the imports of EU products, whereas I know Russians who describe Poles derogatorily as “*yablochniki*” (apple people). In general, food has become an object of many jokes after the introduction of EU sanctions targeting Russia: for example, a Russian cartoon advertised “100% Russian lobsters,” imported from Belarus (of all places!) – “because they have all been granted Russian nationality before being cooked!” (Gubarevich).

In general, the uses and abuses of memory are salient in political conflicts, especially those with former “friends.” This fact affects the public view of shared food. A case in point is the culinary debate generated by the conflict between the Russian Federation and Ukraine. While the controversy over the origins of the beetroot soup, commonly known as *borscht*, has been raging for a long time (see Perianova, *The Polyphony* 87-88), the history of other dishes is now also subject to jealous scrutiny. Thus, duck with apples is described by different culinary forum participants, depending on their nationalities or national affinities, as either Russian or Ukrainian. For instance, a Ukrainian participant claims that “since Ukraine has had a much longer history than Russia, so of course, duck with apples must be a Ukrainian dish” (see *Edim doma*).

Ukrainian staple foods, such as *salo* (pork fat), *horilka* (an alcoholic beverage) or *galushki* (dumplings), according to some Russian nationalists, turn people into Banderites, that is, supporters of the Ukrainian nationalist and part-time Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera (1909 – 1959) (Zhabotinskaya). The description of the alleged Ukrainian staples, with an emphasis on *salo*, even an unlikely and humorous *chocolate covered salo* (see Fawkes), and Ukrainians as *saloedi* (*salo* eaters), is a negative identity statement. On the other hand, attachment to certain foods may outlive various forms of political organization. Riga sprats were touted on First Russian TV channel ORT commercials as “a typical *Russian* food” as late as 2010 – a culinary afterthought and an aftertaste of the Soviet Empire which had ceased to exist more than twenty years earlier. The fact that Riga is now the capital of independent Latvia seemed to be irrelevant. I side with Peter Pomerantsev who maintains that “the Soviet Union was so successful in eradicating the old traditions of Russian culture that there’s very little to pass on to the next generation apart from culinary sentimentality” (34–35).

What has emerged as a new post-transitional myth in Russia, though, is that of the unparalleled quality of the food of yesteryear. It is now replicated as familiar Soviet brands and packaging. A revival of the Soviet brand comes with the slogan “*Sovetskoye znachit otlichnoe!*” (“Soviet” means high quality!). At the glitzy GUM department store in Moscow, in the vast retro-Soviet supermarket filled with dozens of products in their “original” packaging, the advertisements focus on “the taste of our childhood.” By and large, this social behaviour reflects the wishful thinking aspect of identity formation and aligns identity with space and its objects. As Richard Barnes has put it, “[w]ho we are is inextricably linked to where we are, have been or are going” (quoted in Benwell and Stokoe 210). The time travel themes reproduced in the department store take the shopper back to the multi-ethnic Soviet cuisine of the past, and also to a real or vicarious memory of childhood meals of Riga sprats, buckwheat porridge or *tapaca* chicken. Indeed, these dishes, including the Georgian-inspired *tapaca* chicken have turned into a nostalgic image of the former Soviet Union. *Sostalgia* has become more than just a longing for the familiarity and comfort of home – by and large, it evokes a sense of lost ties with a nation (a glorious nation, now in ruins?) and a particular national (or imperial?) identity.

In Sergei Oushakine’s apt phrasing, “retrofitting” the Soviet experience signifies an inclination for an invented Soviet past:

As a result, nostalgia for things Soviet is usually construed as a deliberate or implicit denial of the present. But it is also often perceived as a revisionist project of rewriting history, as a post-communist censorship of sorts aimed at making the complex and troubling past more user-friendly by re-inscribing its reformatted version in the context of today’s entertainment. (452)

In this way the familiar icons of the past represent secondary, reinvented objects, simulacra of a kind, that is, copies without originals. These objects take on a specific semiotic function in the present-day socio-cultural system.

There is no denying that food staples and food taboos are *culture-specific*, which accounts for a different attitude to food as sustenance. Indeed, the identical or similar food with a different symbolic value may create what is known as an “illusion of understanding.” For instance, in British culture, tea is perceived as providing comfort and it is a well-known edible symbolic pointer in Victorian and Edwardian novels. In fictional contexts, whenever a person feels sad, confused or frustrated, the response of somebody close by is to offer him/her a cup of tea. Yet, in eighteenth-century colonial America tea took on a radical symbolical function uniting colonists of different classes and regions and becoming a catalyst for riots. It was thus appropriated as a political symbol. On the other hand, in Bulgaria, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, tea was associated with being unwell. Consequently, a logical reply from somebody who was offered tea could be “I am not ill!” In some Muslim cultures drinking tea is a ritual which has a different “protocol of usage,” as Roland Barthes would have put it. Thus, drinking tea with a man, who is not part of the family, is considered inappropriate for women in certain traditional patriarchal communities, as this quote from Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* indicates: “He sat down, across the table from her, ... It was the first time he had sat down in her home. She thought about tea, but she was unsure what it would mean, to have tea with this boy. He was not a relative.” (212)

In some cases descriptions of the food of the Other may create stereotypes and make-believe culinary identities. For example, in Alan Furst’s *Night Soldiers* (1988), the main character, Khristo, is Bulgarian. He goes to Bulgarian-owned restaurants in different European capitals and consumes ostensibly Bulgarian food and beverages in order to bond with his compatriots: “Khristo stared at the hand-scratched Cyrillic on the ragged piece of paper that served as menu. A waiter filled the cloudy glass ... with yellow wine that smelled like resin.” (129). Further on in the book, Khristo is advised to try the *shkembe*, which is described in the novel as “beef kidney cooked in milk” (234), and another character pronounces it to be “just like home” (234): “[t]he *shkembe* arrived, a vast plateful of it, reeking of rose pepper and sour milk and the singular aroma of kidney. Khristo poked it about with his fork and ate a boiled potato” (234). The food of the culinary Other is completely misrepresented in the extract above. Indeed, the resin-tasting wine is probably the Greek *retsina*, and undoubtedly Bulgarians would smile at the fake description of *shkembe*, a traditional dish which is a local version of tripe soup and which never includes kidneys or potatoes. Also, it is anybody’s guess whether sour milk and yoghurt refer to the same thing in the context of the book.

Russian cuisine has not fared any better in the west, according to Piotr Vail’ and Aleksandr Genis: they claim that some cook books recommend eating *borscht* cold, and in fact feature numerous recipes which would seem quite absurd to Russians (82).

Politicians occasionally make notable *faux pas* foodwise: for instance, during US President Bill Clinton’s visit to Bulgaria in November 1999, he had *foie gras* at a French-style brasserie owned by a Bulgarian expatriate and announced that he had eaten something typically Bulgarian and that it made him feel really Bulgarian (see Perianova, *The Polyphony*).

Perhaps the most interesting new trend at present is the reversal of the subjects and objects of travel. It is food that travels now to reach new destinations. In August 2014, an online advert proclaimed the coming of New York to Sofia – the opening of the Red Apple Kitchen Bar (Ilieva). Restaurants onomastically extolling different tastes or styles abound all over the globe, cf. establishments promoting the taste of Thailand, Mexico or Japan. An increasing number of people claim to be highly knowledgeable about (foreign) food. A case in point: a supermarket sushi survey in the *Guardian* of 5 June 2014 featured a very detailed and ostensibly knowledgeable analysis, with all the appropriate vocabulary, relating to the different types of sushi on offer by UK retailers and supermarkets:

Boots plays pretty fast and loose with the concept of sushi. It is home to both “street sushi” (BLT sushi, anyone?), and, in this pack, smoked salmon “nigari,” which, rather than a block of rice draped with fish, is (admittedly, properly glutinous, sticky) rice into which the fish has been chopped and mixed, pretty meanly. Both it and the red pepper version taste blandly sweet. The cucumber maki rolls are almost devoid of all flavour and cry out for more than the rather caramely, low-salt soy sauce that is included (where is the wasabi or pickled ginger that is standard elsewhere?). The smoked salmon in the maki is reasonably meaty, albeit with a curiously citric edge. As for duck maki, what’s that all about? (Naylor)

The *Guardian* food critic looks down on sushi fusion with BLT (traditional bacon, lettuce, tomato sandwich) and untraditional duck in the rolls. Words such as “authentic,” “real,” “traditional” as opposed to

“invented tradition,” “bad as an idea,” “cheap, clumsy” evidence the store the author sets by the “authenticity” of the Japanese food:

Serious *deja vu* now, as I open *another* Kinjirushi wasabi, *another* Shoda naturally brewed soy sauce. Overly keen to look authentic, Tesco even includes chopsticks when *everybody knows* (no, I didn’t either), that sushi is finger food. Such kowtowing to supposed tradition is ironic, given that the California rolls – char siu chicken, hoisin duck, sweet chilli and ginger prawn – go disastrously off-piste. In fairness, they do taste of something, but in a cheap, clumsy way, where everything is far too sweet and the flavours clang about. Sweet chilli chicken hosomaki is as bad an idea as it sounds, the red pepper nigiri is almost inedible. (Naylor)

Waitrose, on the other hand, offers something that is described as “true” corresponding with the author’s idea of “authenticity”: “[p]oached salmon, sesame-coated California rolls finally deliver some of the subtle but true and clean, complementary flavours that you expect from sushi[;] [y]ou don’t immediately reach for the imported, Japanese condiments (the wasabi is a real rip-snorter)” (Naylor).

The desire to cross an imaginary border and taste the “authentic” food of the Other has come to pervade the globe. However, present-day food lust seems to fit into a different category, that of Bourdieu’s “symbolic capital” (see Perianova, *Polyphony* 103) One of the main concepts related to self-expression through food is probably that of *food “authenticity.”* Other people’s foods may become cherished symbolic capital and recognizing their “true” quality may be interpreted as a sign of sophistication and expertise.

The word “authenticity” may be used in several ways. First, it may refer to *traditional foods* regarded as heritage, reminding people of their childhood. Second, the category of “authenticity” may refer to another type of symbolic capital, that of the so-called *smart new foods*. Third, it embraces the idea of novelty seeking and food adventures with a view of acquiring symbolic capital through familiarization with the food of the Other. In many ways, *neophilia*, love of the new, is tantamount to pushing the thresholds of the unfamiliar.

With “authentic” cuisine of the first type, memory is all-important, and quality, naturalness, seasonality and local ingredients play a significant role. This view of “authenticity” may be described as *vertical* because it harks back to the past. As a throw-back to the past “authenticity” of this type symbolizes a nostalgic craving for foods proven by time, rather than new inventions, which are perceived as possibly dangerous and untrustworthy, and is mostly related to self-respect and bonding. Nonetheless, the quest for (lost) “authenticity” often results in a strange twist – its reinvention, which is, in a way, similar to the proverbial reinvention of the wheel. At the same time, nostalgia seems to be linked to semi-forgotten magic:

Coming to town just once a week, this colourful gaggle of brave traders in everything from unpasteurised cream to lavender-coloured aubergines has something of the circus about it. We gather round the stalls in awe, gasping at the beauty of a cloth-wrapped truckle of cheddar or a wicker hamper of downy field mushrooms picked at dawn. The farmers’ market has become the modern equivalent of a band of travelling minstrels. (Slater 30)

In general, however, “authenticity” seems important for culinary adventurers and food conservatives alike. Sometimes the difference between “make-believe” and “authentic” appears to mirror the one between real and virtual travel. As David Harvey writes:

The general implication is that through the experience of everything from food, to culinary habits, music, television, entertainment, and cinema, it is now possible to experience the world’s geography vicariously, as a simulacrum The interweaving of simulacra in daily life brings together different worlds (of commodities) in the same space and time. (300)

The so-called “smart new foods” represent a different type of symbolic capital. For instance, the penetration of popular foods from western Europe and above all from the USA into the “emerging democracies” of eastern Europe, where those were initially perceived as novelty, is explained by the desire to be “*western.*” Undoubtedly, on account of this desire hamburgers, when they first appeared in eastern Europe and Russia, enjoyed a much more up-market reputation than they did – or do – in the USA. According to Yungxian Yan, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Beijing consumers associated fast food with being American and

“modern.” They enjoyed the standardization of meals, the hospitable service, the democratic environment and the cleanliness, which created a desirable space to socialize and linger. For some Chinese, eating at McDonald’s apparently meant partaking of American culture and travelling to other similar outlets in LA or Paris (500–523).

The prestige value of imported food items coming from affluent America and western Europe, such as salmon and lamb, apparently brings about a rejection of traditional African fare at many receptions, organized by the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS). According to Elizabeth Blunt, who was a BBC correspondent in Sierra Leone, smart food still means foreign food in that part of the world. Unlike local produce, it has prestige, and this is why when Togo hosted ECOWAS, which had ironically been founded to promote regional trade, everything on the menu at the state dinner was ostentatiously imported – salmon, lamb, French cheeses, even strawberries (Blunt).

Consequently, “modern,” more prestigious food, in what are still sometimes described as “less developed” countries, often comes from western Europe or the US. The following example is a case in point. It is excerpted from Marina Lewycka’s *Two Caravans*, a narrative about a strawberry picking team in England, which is made up of people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds – Poles, Chinese, Ukrainians, a Malawian. In the extract below they are shopping for food:

Yola as the supervisor is naturally in charge of the shopping, but in the interests of harmony she lets everyone have a say. They agree on five loaves of white sliced bread (better than coarse Polish bread and quite inexpensive), margarine (more modern than butter, and also cheaper), apricot jam (Tomasz’s favourite), teabags and sugar (they have been drying out and reusing their teabags, but there is a limit), bananas (Andriy’s choice, typical Ukrainian), salted peanuts (a special request from Emanuel), a large bar of rum and raisin chocolate (Yola’s little luxury), two large bottles of Coca-Cola for the Chinese girls, and a tin of dog food. (Lewycka, *Two* 66)

Apart from its cheapness, this choice of products is typical: white bread (ostensibly part of the “working class” diet in the UK) and margarine (more “modern” than butter, but also containing trans fats and a likely cause of coronary disease as medical research has shown) represent a poor global diet of chemical food items. Regrettably (but not surprisingly), a similar diet marks “status” in certain African countries, and is preferred by middle class people to locally grown millet and other staples (see Goody 28). In the fictional context of Lewycka’s strawberry pickers, the “typically Ukrainian” choice of bananas testifies to a sort of reverse status going back to the time of state socialism, with its food deficits and a craving for exotic foods, such as bananas. In a letter to his sister another character from *Two Caravans*, a Malawian, comments that his new friend, Andriy, “being Ukrainian [is] much beloved of bananas” (185). Even though the story unfolds after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the highly ingrained and encoded subliminal myth of bananas as an “elite” food item is still shown to be vibrant. As Benwell and Stokoe write, “[w]e consume according to who we are or what we want to be” (167).

Initially, in the conditions of globalization the prestige value of imported items coming from affluent America and western Europe resulted in a rejection or a modification of traditional fare. Like margarine, low-cuisine “boil-in bags” were declared by certain new migrants from eastern Europe to be, in the words of a Ukrainian character from Lewycka’s best-known novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (2005), “modern cooking, not peasant cooking” (28) because they were perceived as the food of the respected culinary Other. For the same reason queues formed in front of Pizza Hut and McDonald’s outlets when they first appeared in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc.

Food has a very direct link to acculturation (see Perianova, “Food As a Paradigm”). Through food people set out to change their identity in order to “become” (like) the respected Other. The narrator of Ali’s *Brick Lane* represents such a process of change in the following way: “Shahana did not want to listen to Bengali classical music[;] [h]er written Bengali was shocking[;] [s]he wanted to wear jeans[;] [s]he hated her kameez and spoiled her entire wardrobe by pouring paint on them[;] [i]f she could choose between *baked beans and dal* it was no contest [my emphasis]” (180).

In late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Bulgaria, the shift from what was perceived as the Oriental legacy of the Ottoman Empire to a desired European identity was echoed by the culinary dichotomy of “*supa*” (soup) and “*chorba*,” two parallel terms, which denoted the same dish but implied different attitudes.

“*Supa*” and “*chorba*” turned into paradoxical culinary banners of the advocates of the two opposing approaches to Bulgaria’s historical choice between “civilized” Europe and the “backward” Orient. In Bulgarian writer Aleko Konstantinov’s satire *Bai Ganyo. Incredible Tales of a Modern Bulgarian* (1895), the demi-Oriental (anti-)hero explains to his Czech hostess that “[s]oup is a European dish, but *chorba* is Turkish” and adds that “[n]owadays, we [i. e. Bulgarians] eat more soup than *chorba*” (52). The Turks are thus othered through their allegedly different food and “*chorba*” becomes the marked term of the binary opposition. In the ironic context of Konstantinov’s book, through “*soup*” Bai Ganyo attempts to jump onto the European bandwagon as the appellation acquires symbolic capital and provides affiliation and bonding with other “civilized” Europeans (see Perianova, “Identity and Food”). Significantly, the protagonist spills some of the privileged food, thus soiling his hostess’s tablecloth, as he is “carried away with his desire to prove himself a man of impeccable manners” (52).

Social identity is a question of affiliation with an imagined community, of imagining oneself as the sharer of common history and destiny with thousands or millions of others whom one can never know personally (see Anderson). This is why for those who simultaneously belong to different communities, being introduced to new things, which for many reasons they find desirable, may trigger off complicated psychological processes. Severing one’s ties with old favourites or staples may be a wrench. This is especially true of teenagers who are psychologically unable to “commute” between different identity layers – those of their parents whose identity belongs to the past and their peers who are regarded as a desirable future. Therefore, eating or serving the “wrong” food, different from the fare of the mainstream, may result in a sense of rejection and may lead to unhappiness. Ironically, it is their parents’ food, a link to the past, that becomes the food of the Other and a denial of the im/possible future. In Pat Conroy’s *Beach Music* (1997), which is set in the American South, ethnic food, instead of familiar and peer-accepted hamburgers with ketchup, served by the immigrant parents of a Jewish girl to her fellow students as a celebration of the girl’s birthday, becomes the reason for the daughter’s suicide. For her, the food, which seems weird to her guests, symbolizes her irreversible otherness and inability to integrate and adopt the coveted all-American identity.

Eating patterns frequently indicate the background of an individual, his/her self-image and his/her place within a certain group or community. In the 1986 American film *Hannah and Her Sisters*, the character played by Woody Allen, a Jew newly converted to Catholicism, unloads his grocery bag and the camera focuses on Wonder Bread and Hellman’s Mayonnaise. What is very notable in this visualization is that, according to Deborah Tannen, although Jews would never eat Wonder Bread, Hellman’s Mayonnaise is their preferred brand. The famous linguist notes that even though Allen’s character has changed his religion and tried to change his eating habits, he has remained fundamentally a New York Jew (152). Probably his new identity as a Catholic will prove to be only temporary. The example also indicates that food represents a new *discursive currency* as a way to signal a *desired – or unwanted – identity*. An analogy is provided by foreign travel: the consumption of the “right” kind of food may be a sign of the traveller becoming “of the space” rather than merely being “in” it as a tourist (Bauman 29).

The touristic desire for “authenticity” brings us back to the quest for novelty or *neophilia*. Neophilia is mostly typical of the young and wealthy. It has been defined as “a bias experienced by North American culture, ... a pull exerted by trend-setting ‘upwardly mobile’ classes” (Visser 43). In some ways neophilia testifies to openness and curiosity and accounts for the popularity of culinary tourism, an urge to experience a culinary adventure.

Culinary tourism has turned into a buzz trend in the twentieth century (see Heldke), and new, formerly unknown dishes have become buzz treats. Indeed, I was amazed to discover online that many people who did not know anything about Bulgaria wanted to take part in Bulgarian meet groups in Canada because they were interested in a new culinary experience, that is, they wished to sample Bulgarian food. In addition to culinary tourism, there is a tendency to go in for what Bourdieu has called “culinary populism” (185), that is, the sampling of humble and simple local dishes. For those eager to be enriched with new cultural capital the trend also represents a quest for novelty and adventure. In western Europe and the US novelty-seeking involves constantly changing food fads and fashions, “from nouvelle to Cajun to Fusion to Tuscan to Pacific Rim” (Fox 300).

Often some kind of rivalry arises as to what the ultimately “authentic” meal is. Ironically, this may lead to disputes because it is felt that the versions, incarnations or avatars of the food on offer in North America

(whether Chinese, Thai, Japanese or Russian) and elsewhere in what is generally designated as “the west” and even in eastern Europe have relatively little to do with what people in these countries eat. Tatiana Tolstaya humorously comments on the instructions provided to patrons in New York cafés supposedly serving “authentic” Russian food: when one reads the recommendation to use the allegedly “authentic” Russian style of eating *borscht* – spoonfuls of soup followed by spoonfuls of sour cream - one feels like “scattering ashes on one’s head and dashing out screaming into the night” (Tolstaya). Of course, Tolstaya exaggerates.

It may in fact be assumed that the quest for “authenticity” creates a culture of convenience with its typical standardization of offers. A succession of simulacra is produced. For instance, Burger King’s claim that its fast food restaurants are “Home[s] of the Whopper” rests only on the offer of replicas without originals. The crossing of an imaginary boundary begins at home, in cases of home delivery when both time and space appear to shrink to zero. A convenient “authenticity,” as the food of, say, China is transported to one’s home, dispenses with the constraints of time and space.

The pseudo-authentic food of the Other may be analysed from the perspective of *wrapping*. The concept of wrapping has been discussed by Joy Hendry, who studied politeness in Japan and defined certain aspects of it, such as hiding and indirectness, as “wrapping.” Similarly, what the imaginary food of the Other entails is symbolization and embellishment. People opt for symbols, not “reality.”

The distinction between “real” and “pseudo” does not disappear when we consider the food of the past as historical heritage and nostalgia. “Authenticity” is a construct in this case, too. Although the packaging may be an exact replica of the (imagined or remembered) original, what is inside is not.

Identity-building through food is an ongoing process. Yet, *caveat emptor* – let the buyer beware! What is offered in the post-Soviet context, for example, as truly iconic Soviet candy, tinned fish, salads or other memory-ridden foods, may ring familiar bells, but in those items there is an abundance of new ingredients, should one bother to read: palm oil, modified starch, a selection of E-numbers. The symbolic essence of the food is intact but the content is very different. What shoppers buy in such cases is the nostalgic past – with its allegedly healthy products, a reaffirmation of the “greatness” of a lost world. Hence, despite the ostensible revival of Soviet foods in the post-Soviet context, consumers are basically looking at familiar images but the content is different. Only the iconic wrapping looks and feels the same.

Hence the original no longer exists and the new offer becomes a simulacrum, a pseudo-authentic food of the past, produced according to new standards and jurisdictions. The chasm of time has not been bridged. We stay with the make-believe, which for us is still full of magic due to the tricks of memory. Thus food becomes a way to signal a desirable or a non-desirable identity, be it our own or that of the Other. The discourse of a reimagined and recoded past is in conformity with certain invented aspects of individual and/or group identity.

No ontological gaps have been bridged and the distinction between “us” and “them” has not been subverted in the realm of food and its consumption. “Authenticity” is a construct but it does not follow from this that the food of the Other stays permanently on the other side of the border. Food definitely travels across borders today – albeit not in its pristine “authenticity.” Research has shown that Tandoori or Balti restaurants are an integral part of a weekend lunch or dinner out in England. Increasingly, the food that a lot of Brits miss most when they are travelling is not fish and chips or steak-and-kidney pie but “a proper English curry” (Fox 301). Such preferences demonstrate that intercultural contacts “add[] more layers to the cultural landscape” (Ichijo and Ranta 169). The same may be said about the effects of nostalgia and searches for a lost culinary – or political – legacy. The latter-day cultural landscape is characterized by exceptional diversity and food, either imported or resuscitated from the past in one form or another, is part of the overall multi-coloured picture.

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