

# The aestheticisation of food: taste, time and typicality

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## 1. Introduction

A contradiction between high output and improved quality is often thought to run through the food sector. This contradiction is potentially of long standing. For instance, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto (2001) shows in his recent history of food that humans have long been entranced by the dream of 'abundance'. Citing examples from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, medieval England, and revolutionary France, he asserts that

“gigantic appetite has commanded prestige in almost every society, partly as a sign of prowess and partly, perhaps, as an indulgence accessible only to wealth. Except where it is commonplace, as in the modern west, fat is admirable and greatness goes with greatness of girth” (ibid. p.118)<sup>1</sup>.

However, alongside this aspiration for excess, Fernandez-Armesto discerns a long-standing interest in the variety and quality of foods available. In his view, “mere quantity could not remain the only criteria for a prestigious diet. Taste as well as waste has an ennobling effect” (ibid. p. 126). In some cultures, he says, the culture of abundance has been challenged by an ethos that “condemns unrestraint as barbarous and exalts that

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<sup>1</sup> Although this last sentence hints that the aspiration for quantity may have been refashioned in our own affluent times, Fernandez-Armesto still finds evidence of a “cult of abundance” in the world’s richest nation, the United States, “an example of splurge and overspill in a culture always struggling to escape from a past dominated by the Puritan gospel of thrift” (ibid. p.124). Fernandez-Armesto quotes figures that show how the daily food intake of western citizens has risen from 2000 calories per day at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 3000 calories today. As he comments, “in the USA and some parts of north-west Europe, obesity is now a bigger social problem than malnutrition” (ibid. p.230). Industrialisation and standardisation have thus reinforced a culture of excess.

nobility of austerity and simplicity” (ibid. pp. 127-8)<sup>2</sup>. This ethos leads to ‘cuisine’ and the elaborate preparation of food in order to draw out its distinguishing characteristics. Again, this tradition has a long history. Fernandez-Armesto cites the example of Roman banquets which moved from “excess” to “elaboration” and quotes Livy as saying: “it was then that the cook, who had formerly had the status of the lowest kind of slave, first acquired prestige, and what had once been servitude came to be thought of as an art” (ibid. pp131-132).

Cuisines have developed in differing ways according to food availability and cultural aspiration. But in general, they have spread beyond courtly circles to society at large. As they filter down the social hierarchy, cuisines become, in Fernandez-Armesto’s view both a “standard of aspiration” and the “norm for every bourgeois family” (ibid. p.139). Within the growing bourgeois strata of European societies a taste for diversity and distinction begins to dislodge the consumption of simple staples, especially once the establishment of empires joins with new developments in transportation to permit the easier importation of previously rare or exotic foodstuffs. Taste and discernment have therefore become increasingly evident in food consumption practices (Montanari, 1994).

In our own time the contradiction between quantity and quality has been brought to the fore by the progressive industrialisation of the food chain. The emergence of mass food markets, alongside ‘Fordist’ methods of production and the associated economies of scale, has generated unprecedented abundance. At the same time, industrialisation has seemingly resulted in greater and greater standardisation, a process that renders differing foods more alike in terms of their manufactured content. This process affects not just production, processing and retailing but eating itself, so that meals now carry their industrial properties into our mouths and bodies (Probyn, 2000)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Fernandez-Armesto refers to the courtly food of the Imperial Japanese tradition, in which “tiny slivers and cubes and shoots and buds – a single small egg, a trio of beans – become individual dishes, selected and presented for aesthetic pleasure, as much for the eye as the palate and for the mind rather than the stomach” (Ibid. p. 126).

<sup>3</sup> Consider the following description of a McDonald’s meal: “the entire fast food meal is composed of separable, modular interchangeable elements. The inner structure of the burger itself can easily be separated into further components, all open for inspection. The assembly of each hamburger has a clearly

Nevertheless, despite some degree of standardisation, quality and distinction continue to be asserted within modern production and consumption processes. In fact, the contemporary generation of abundance has given a new lease of life to cuisine distinctions as more and more consumers seek to exercise discerning choices in order to separate themselves from the ‘mass’ (Bourdieu, 1984). Local foods, organic foods, exotic foods, traditional foods – all have become popular with more discerning middle-class, postmodern consumers (the fastest growing segment of the market). Such discernment not only promotes a fragmentation of food markets but also indicates that patterns of development in the food sector may be diverse and multiple rather than singular and uniform (Miele and Murdoch, 2002). Arguably, ‘quality’ now competes with ‘quantity’ as the overarching logic of food supply.

This competition raises anew the apparent contradiction between the production of large volumes and the production of distinctive and high value foods. The dominance of industrialised foods challenges the conventional notions of quality that have long been established around traditional and ‘natural’ methods of production, while the reassertion of quality foods in the industrial era often seems to imply a turning away from industrial technologies and a rediscovery of more typical or authentic production processes<sup>4</sup>. Thus, differing parts of the food sector seem to head off on opposing trajectories of development, some towards a more refined or intensive application of science and technology (e.g. GM foods), others towards a re-engagement with natural or traditional production methods.

These trends hold implications for the politics of production and consumption in the food sector. On the one hand, producers, processors and manufacturers may work to overcome any consumer resistance to the application of new scientific techniques. On the other

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mechanical nature. Even the look of the different parts alludes to various technological processes, rather than having the conventional appearance of cooked food” (Boym 2001 p.7).

<sup>4</sup> As Fernandez-Armesto says in concluding his history, “an artisanal reaction is already underway. Local revulsion from pressure to accept the products of standardised taste has stimulated revivals of traditional cuisines....In prosperous markets the emphasis is shifting from cheapness to quality, rarity and esteem for

hand, alternative food chains and networks may come into being in order to strengthen local and environmental linkages (Murdoch and Miele, 1999; 2002). While these two approaches would seem to be in conflict, it also appears that the contemporary food market can accommodate (at least temporarily) foods of both types as consumers ‘pick and mix’ from the array of available products. In the process, differing conceptions of ‘quality’ come to be arrayed against one another (Wilkinson, 1997).

In this paper we wish to focus on the meaning of ‘quality’. We do so by investigating two discourses that often govern its practical assertion by producers and consumers: economic efficiency and aesthetic value. While economic efficiency has long been recognised as a key mode of organising food chains, aesthetic value has been a rather neglected area of concern. Yet the aesthetic dimension is clearly important in food production and consumption activities. This is nicely illustrated by Gary Fine’s (1996) book *Kitchens*, which analyses food preparation work within restaurants. Fine argues that much of what is defined as ‘quality’ in the restaurants has aesthetic attributes: “For some the criteria for quality labour are primarily in the product: the sights, feel, taste, or smell; for others they are in the performance: but for each the work has a style, a sense of form, an aesthetic” (ibid. p.180). Food preparation requires “aesthetic choices” to be made and these choices are a form of organisational decision making in which restaurant workers have genuine freedom of expression. Thus, the aesthetic dimension holds some relative autonomy from the economic: “aesthetics emphasises that these choices are distinct from purely instrumental and efficient choices: that workers care about ‘style’ not only technical quality” (ibid. p.178). We thus encounter here what Gagnier (2001) calls a “practical aesthetics”, an aesthetics of everyday activity (rather than aesthetics of philosophical doctrine) (see also Fine 1996 p.179). This “practical aesthetics” can be found in processes of food preparation; it is not something only held by consumers or connoisseurs of food.

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artisanal methods....The future will be much more like the past than the pundits of futurology have foretold” (ibid. p.250).

While Fine wishes to show that aesthetic concerns animate restaurant workers, he is also aware that these concerns must interact with the economic dimensions of restaurant work. He says “cooks must keep one eye on the stove and the other on the marketplace, balancing their sensibilities with what the hospitality industry will permit” (ibid. p.190). The structure of the industry and the labour process within the restaurants ‘enable’ and ‘constrain’ aesthetic practice. Comparing a fast food restaurant with an up-market eaterie, he (ibid. p.192) says:

“the self-image and market niche of a restaurant affects how workers view the sensory qualities of their production. Although McDonald’s and Lutece have aesthetics associated with their work, the cooks at the latter have more autonomy, and their aesthetic decisions are more subtle and consequential. McDonald’s maintains corporate aesthetic standards for the ‘design’ of their food, set by a central office. Worker ‘aesthetics’ at McDonald’s involves problem solving of immediate product needs: following pre-set rules for style, efficiency and routinely coping with customer demands”.

Thus, the scope for practical aesthetics varies according to the organisation of the labour process and the economic positioning of the restaurant.

In comparing McDonald’s and Lutece, Fine speculates that the latter provides workers with greater autonomy and that this autonomy can be expressed aesthetically. We take this as a starting point in proposing that the narrative of ‘aestheticisation’ may yield an alternative to the ‘economisation’ repertoire that has so often dominated not just the production and consumption of food, but academic analyses of these processes. In order to study the aesthetic dimension more closely we begin, in Section 2, by briefly considering the relationship between economic and aesthetic discourses. We do not provide a comprehensive overview of either discourse but instead examine a number of key texts that allow us to consider how aesthetic concerns might be employed in the face of economic rationalisation. We situate a growing interest in aesthetics in the context of recent social theory, notably Beck’s (1992) and Lash’s (1998) account of reflexive modernisation. However, we extend the notion of ‘aesthetic reflexivity’ proposed in these

accounts by situating it within a ‘hybrid’ perspective, one that allows us to see aesthetics as an ‘immersion’ in complex and fluctuating relationships.

In Section 3 we turn to examine a case of ‘aestheticisation in action’. We outline the use of aesthetics in the Slow Food movement. Slow Food has attempted to highlight food’s aesthetic qualities as part of a general challenge to industrialisation and standardisation in the food sector. It has asserted that food comes laden with culture and embodies a diverse array of tastes. Slow Food thus claims that greater attention needs to be paid to concerns other than the economic. In so doing it promotes a ‘practical aesthetics’ one that embeds food in a host of complex interrelationships. It therefore indicates the significance of aesthetic issues in the context of a globalised food sector.

## 2. Economics versus aesthetics: the competing discourses of modernity

In order to understand the relative neglect of aesthetic issues within economic analyses we begin by briefly considering the relationship between the two discourses as set out by Regenia Gagnier her (2000) book *The insatiability of human wants*. In this work Gagnier argues that for much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century economics and aesthetics worked in a complementary fashion. She (ibid. p. 145) says:

“if economics in the 19<sup>th</sup> century defined itself as the domain for the provision for the needs and desires of the people, aesthetics was in its most inclusive sense, the apprehension and expression of the people’s needs and desires at the level of sense, feeling and emotion”.

However, Gagnier believes that this complementary relationship was undone during a shift “from notions of Economic Man as producer...to a view of Economic Man as consumer” (ibid. p.2)<sup>5</sup>. She argues that within the dominant economic ideology of consumer society the focus of attention now became the systems of valuation that allow

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<sup>5</sup> Gagnier discerns in the work of the classical economists – Smith, Ricardo, Mill and Marx – an aesthetic concern. This is evident, she claims, in the labour theory of value where the value of goods is measured by the labour invested in them. This concern for labour found its counterpart in aesthetic discourse, with writers such as Ruskin proposing that the value of any creative work derives from the labour process in which it is set. The turn to consumption corresponded with a downplaying of labour’s significance so that labour became a commodity like any other.

diverse tastes to be expressed within the market place. As a consequence, 'value' came to depend entirely on utility, that is, on consumer perceptions of goods. Thus,

“goods are economic or not, have economic value (now equal to price) or not, not according to their substantive properties but according to whether demand for them exceeds supply. Value, that is, was a concept like distance...relative, always in reference to something else, not intrinsic or absolute” (ibid. p.47).

In this shift to consumerism, utility became the measure of value. Alternative aesthetic ideas were therefore pushed into the background of economic life<sup>6</sup>. If the aesthetic plays any role, it is as an aid to the economic. In this regard, Welsch (1996 p.3) points to a process of “market aestheticisation” in which “aesthetic flair” is employed to give commodities a “sugar coating”. This market aesthetics renders “even the unsaleable saleable, and improves the already saleable two or three times over” (ibid. see also Gronow, 1997).

In Gagnier's account, economics dominates aesthetics so that modes of valuation reflect narrowly defined utilitarian concerns. More than this, however, valuation becomes an individualised process. She says, “value cease[s] to be evaluative across persons; it becomes individual, subjective, or psychological” (ibid. p.94). Thus, the assertion of value in consumer society is determined almost entirely by individual choice, where choice is simply the revealing of internally ordered preferences. Yet, as Beck (1992), Bauman (2001) and Lash (1998) all emphasise, this process of “individualisation” is reliant upon a supporting socio-economic infrastructure, one that can ensure consumer aspirations are met in direct and unmediated ways. Rationalised systems of production are required to produce sufficient numbers of familiar goods to meet the demands of mass consumption. Once this infrastructure is established, consumers can make their choices by following well-established rules and routines; as Beck (2001 p.269) puts it, “simplification [i]s the order of the day; products c[an] be produced with no unexpected

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<sup>6</sup> In Gagnier's view this development means that economics as a scientific discipline is unable to deal with the formation of tastes, which are seen as extraneous to the decision making processes that 'reveal'

consequences....There [i]s one best way, one economic optimum, one most efficient solution, one means to a given end". Industrial processes thus unfold in line with this "one solution", while patterns of consumption correspond to the "economic optimum".

Beck terms this period of stability and confidence in the products of industrial society a "first modernity". It is a time when society approximates a marketplace in which seemingly 'knowledgeable' individuals choose from amongst a range of 'knowable' goods. This "first modernity" remains stable, however, only as long as the objects of consumption adhere to their instrumentalised roles. But as Beck (1992) points out, patterns of industrialisation increasingly give rise to subjects and objects that behave in unintended ways. He thus identifies the emergence of a "second modernity", one he calls "risk society". He sees this modernity as "a completely different playing field, because whatever we do, we expect to encounter unexpected consequences". Now, "many things that were once considered universally certain and safe and vouched for by every conceivable authority turn[...] out to be deadly (atomic energy, asbestos, beef). Applying that knowledge to the present and the future devalues the certainties of today" (ibid. p.273). Within this "political economy of uncertainty" (Bauman, 2001) the taken-for-granted rules that guide behaviour in modernity's first phase can no longer be relied upon. That is, the dissolution of the 'taken-for granted' and the structures underlying earlier assumptions means that in making choices individuals are "pulled between an increased insecurity about knowing what to do and an increased awareness of possessing agency, the capacity to do something" (Halkier 2001 p.208).

Importantly, Lash (1998) argues that "doing something" in "second modernity" depends upon "aesthetic judgement"<sup>7</sup>. Consumers, in assembling preferences, choices and tastes, are forced into a changed relationship with the objects of these preferences, choices and tastes. This changed relationship means the consumer is caught between "experience"

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consumer preferences. In her view (ibid. p.243), "an adequate method would need to recontextualise the idea of individual needs and choices within the social constitution of individuals".

<sup>7</sup> According to Lash, such judgement is "neither determinate, nor fully indeterminate, but partly determinate in that we have to search for a rule" (ibid. p.4). He also says "judgement is the faculty that then goes in search of a rule for the event or object" (p. 197). Unlike in first modernity this rule can rarely be known in advance.

and “judgement”, between the need to apply an instrumental rationality (concerned, for instance, with risk or economic calculation) and the need to deal with indeterminacy, flux and uncertainty. The modern consumer is forced to utilise an “aesthetic judgement of taste” (Lash 1998 p.4) and this entails both intellectual reflection (in order to establish a rule) and imagination, understanding, reason and feeling (in order to establish a relationship). Consumers therefore need to simultaneously engage the commodity in an intimate relationship and hold the commodity at a critical distance.

It is clear that such aesthetic judgement requires openness to the multiple rationalities, conventions or modes of thinking that underpin decision making in this “second modernity”. Such openness and multiplicity become doubly important as Lash goes on to describe the emergence of a “third modernity”, one that threatens even further the status of instrumental rationality. He is referring here to the rise of what he calls “global information culture” but what might be more readily interpreted as a world of “networks” and “quasi-objects” (as in Latour, 1993). New subject/object relations can be detected, Lash argues, in a culture comprised of “things that think, of objects with information and memory, of objects that talk, judge, police and seduce”, of “biological things that take on informational status” (ibid. p.342). In this context, the instrumental relationship between subjects (e.g. consumers) and objects (e.g. commodities) that has already been dislodged by “second modernity” is even further disrupted. Thus, aesthetic judgement becomes even more significant as social actors attempt to find their way among the networks and quasi-objects (ibid. p.346).

While Lash alerts us to the significance of aesthetic reflection, he tells us very little about the new relationship between the subjects (consumers) and objects (commodities) required within “third modernity”. A few more clues can however be derived from Isobel Armstrong’s *The radical aesthetic*, a book that takes up John Dewey’s (1934) suggestion that the aesthetic should be seen as embedded in ordinary human action and experience. In Armstrong’s reading of Dewey’s work, experience is “interactive” or “relational” in that it implies a profound connection between (reflexive) subject and (aesthetic) object (Armstrong, 2000 p.164). In proposing this view Armstrong is keen to dissolve any

dualism between subject and object so as to allow a recognition that “experience is a two-sided state’ in which “the expressive object and the response it calls forth are a unity, just as the expressive object and the perception which shaped it are a unity” (ibid.). Thus, the aesthetic experience comprises both the relation between subject and object and what is (reflexively) made of this relation.

Armstrong stresses that an appreciation of the aesthetic dimension introduces its own forms of evaluation into economic life:

“The aesthetic energizes us by demanding not judgement but a desire of explication, an ever more adequate understanding of its possibilities, a repeated pursuit of the meanings forming it...the experience makes us pause, not because it is transcendent but because it is so close to our sensuous and intellectual life that it starts some involuntary hermeneutic and shaping process” (ibid.)

Armstrong emphasises that the development of an aesthetic sensibility entails the continuous reflection upon the meaning of relationalism. We might think of this as an ‘aesthetic of immersion’, one that sees the individual social actor submerged in a world of complex relations and shifting identities.

Armstrong follows Dewey by arguing that the aesthetic refers to the full range of experience that is brought to bear in the flow of action. This ‘practical aesthetics’ combines reflection and immersion in even the most mundane activities. It should therefore be evident in the arenas of economic life. This view is also held by Antonio Strati (1999 p.79) in his study of aesthetics and organisation,

“one may observe this ‘art of organising’ by watching managers at work, or the ‘art of entertainment’ by watching musicians or actors perform. One may observe a mechanic as she/he pursues his art of tuning a car engine, or a designer at her/his drawing board engaged in the art of designing a car body...all these arts are distinguished by an ‘of’ which ties them to a particular activity”.

The ‘practical aesthetics’ identified by Gagnier, Armstrong and Strati might be allied to the aesthetic judgement required in “third modernity” to provoke reflection upon the relations that surround and compose particular economic practices<sup>8</sup>. In order to understand in a little more detail the forms this aesthetic reflection might take we now turn to consider its expression in the food sector.

### 3. The aesthetics of Slow Food

The three ‘stages’ of modernity outlined by Lash are evident in the food sector. The application of science and technology within the industrialisation process has a long history and has been documented by many scholars (e.g. Goodman et al., 1987; Friedland et al., 1991). As is now well-known, science, technology and industry have combined to transform food production processes, often in line with economies of scale, so that greater quantities of standardised products have been generated for relatively stable (mass) markets. Similarly the development of instrumental relationships according to the precepts of marginal economics has dislodged traditional modes of evaluation from agriculture and other parts of the food chain (see Murdoch and Ward, 1997; van der Ploeg, 1990). This “first modernity” has generally resulted in food being produced and consumed in line with instrumental notions of economic and industrial efficiency.

However, a “second modernity” has gradually come to the fore with a recognition that not only is food changing in line with more complex consumer tastes, but food consumption is also an inherently ‘risky’ activity. The emergence of BSE and other industrially-generated diseases has led to a heightened awareness of food’s potentially damaging or lethal qualities. Consumers have once again become cautious in their engagement with food products (a caution very much to the fore in their perceptions of genetically-modified foods)<sup>9</sup>. In other words, they have become more ‘reflexive’ in their relationships with food commodities: what were once taken for granted as simple goods

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<sup>8</sup> We can see this aesthetic surfacing in a number of contemporary writing, such as Latour’s (1993) work on “networks of translation”, Serres’ (1987) portrayal of “quasi-objects”, and Haraway’s (1993) conception of “cyborg selves”.

<sup>9</sup> We recognise, of course, that cultural variations in these attitudes towards foods exist. We are writing very much with European publics in mind here but the same worries are evident in many other food cultures.

are now subjected to a critical distancing in which some form of judgement (perhaps based on information stemming from government or media) is brought to bear (Halkier, 2001; Nygard and Storstad, 1998).

This “second” or “reflexive” modernity has recast many of the assumptions underpinning food production and consumption processes. Perhaps most significantly, it has challenged the application of an instrumental rationality across all aspects of food production so that competing modes of evaluation have become apparent (Wilkinson, 1997). The risks generated by the industrialised food sector alert consumers, politicians, media and other interested parties to the social and ecological connections that surround the productive process and to the far-reaching consequences that can accompany the act of consumption. We therefore witness moves to ‘re-embed’ food in many of the social, cultural and environmental contexts that industry and government has in the past worked so hard to displace (Murdoch et al., 2000). In line with the notion of a “third modernity”, Goodman (1999) claims that the food sector has entered an “Age of Ecology” wherein a whole host of complex relations are recognised as comprising the “metabolic reciprocities” of production and consumption (see also FitzSimmons and Goodman, 1998).

Modes of evaluation shift in line with these three modernities. In the current stage, industrial and market modes compete with those concerned to assert environmental and social connectedness. The re-embedding of food in natural and social relations takes a number of forms. It can be seen in the assertion of organic foods, which are held to retain key natural qualities. It can be seen in the assertion of local foods, which are thought to retain the social qualities of particular places. And it can be seen in the assertion of typical or traditional foods, which are believed to carry cultural qualities associated with long-established cuisines. In their different ways, these food types challenge the instrumental rationalities of the industrialised food sector and assert the need for more relationally-embedded forms of production and consumption.

The ‘re-embedding’ of food requires a ‘re-embedding’ of producers and consumers. And this re-embedding calls forth an aesthetic response so that a new appreciation of food and

its qualities is required. This new appreciation requires not only some degree of critical judgement (in order to assess, safety, risk etc) but also a new form of engagement; a new “metabolic reciprocity” between subject (producer/consumer) and object (food commodity) (see, for instance, FitzSimmons and Goodman, 1998; Probyn, 2000). Now practices of production and consumption reflect an engagement with complex but shifting and unstable relations.

In order to illustrate how the aesthetic of “third modernity” may be beginning to play itself out in the food sector, we briefly consider a new social movement that has done much to immerse food in an aesthetic sensibility – Slow Food. This organisation emerged out of the cultures of food that surround regional cuisines in Italy. It was established in 1986 in Bra, a small town in the Piedmont region by a group of food writers and chefs. The immediate motivation was growing concern about the potential impact of McDonald’s on local food cultures. The first Italian McDonald’s had opened the previous year in Trentino Alto Adige, a region in the North East. It was quickly followed by a second in Rome. This latter restaurant, because of its location in the famous Piazza di Spagna gave rise to a series of protests (see Resca and Gianola, 1998 for a full account); these protests provided the spur for the founding of Slow Food. As Renato Sardo, the director of Slow Food International, put it:

“There was a lot of public debate at the time [1986] about standardisation, the McDonaldisation, if you will, of the world. Up until then, any opposition was split in two. On the one hand there were the gastronomes, whose focus was fixed entirely on the pleasure of food. The other tradition was a Marxist one, which was about the methods of food production and their social and historical implications. Carlo Petrini, Slow Food's president, wanted to merge the two debates to provide a way forward”. (quoted in The Observer Food Monthly 11/11/2001 *Slowly does it*).

The movement’s founders were concerned that the arrival of McDonald’s would threaten not the growing up-market restaurants frequented by the middle/upper class city dwellers, but local *osterie* and *trattorie*, the kinds of places that serve local dishes and which have traditionally been frequented by people of all classes. Because, in the Italian context,

traditional eateries retain a close connection to local food production systems, Slow Food argued that their protection required the general promotion of local food cultures.

In taking forward these concerns, Slow Food was established on the basis of a local structure, coordinated by a central headquarters in Bra (which now employs around 100 people). The local branches effectively engage in a range of activities aimed at strengthening local cuisines. These branches were initially established in all the Italian regions (and were called *condotte*) but soon began to spread to other European countries and then further afield (where they are called *convivia*). In 1989 Slow Food was formally launched as an international movement. In that year representatives from twenty countries attended a meeting in Paris and agreed both an international structure and a manifesto. The manifesto asserted “a firm defence of quiet material pleasure” and stated “Our aim is to rediscover the richness and aromas of local cuisines to fight the standardisation of Fast Food”. It went on to say: “Our defence should begin at the table with Slow Food. Let us rediscover the flavours and savours of regional cooking and banish the degrading effects of Fast Food... That is what real culture is all about: developing taste rather than demeaning it”. The movement thus began to establish itself outside Italy and at the time of writing, *convivia* exist in 40 countries and the movement has around 80,000 members.

In articulating a response to the spread of McDonald’s throughout Italy, effectively became a ‘clearing house’ for knowledge of local foods, initially in Italy, but latterly, globally. The main means by which knowledge about local and typical cuisines is disseminated is the publishing company, established in 1990. It publishes a range of guides in order to lead consumers to the food products available in a whole variety of local areas. In the main these refer to Italian cuisines. Thus, alongside the *Vini d'Italia* wine guide, published in collaboration with the *Gambero Rosso* food monthly, a consolidated reference work for connoisseurs and producers alike, Slow Food publishes *Osterie d'Italia*, a guide to the traditional cuisine of the Italian regions. As the movement has internationalised however so its publications have begun to focus upon typical foods found outside Italy. It recently published the *Guida ai Vini del Mondo*, a world wine

guide describing as many as 1,900 cellars in 30 countries and *Formaggi d'Europa* a 'fact sheet' on the 127 European DOP cheeses in 1997. The movement's quarterly magazine *Slow* is also produced in five languages and carries articles on foods from around the world.

These publications have developed a highly aestheticised approach to local and traditional foods. They display such foods within lavish settings, using extensive artwork and photography. Typical foods are shown to be both authentic *and* sophisticated at one and the same time. Colours are rich and warm, shapes are elegant and evocative, settings are sophisticated and stimulating. However, Slow Food not only aestheticises food in a visual way: it also concentrates a great deal of attention on what it calls "taste education". This stems from its concern that as people become more dependent on fast food so they lose the ability to eat foods of widely varying flavours and textures. "Taste education" means ensuring that people retain the ability to appreciate the qualities of local foods. In the main this educative process takes place through the activities of the local members and groups. Every Slow Food group is encouraged to organise theme dinners, food and wine tours, tasting courses, local food conventions, and so on. Likewise, the central headquarters puts a great deal of emphasis on national and international taste events. The following are the most noteworthy: 'Excellentia', a three-day meeting involving 5,000 people all over Italy in twice-yearly blind tastings of international and Italian wines; 'Taste Week' (*La Settimana del Gusto*), which sets out to familiarise young people with quality catering; and the 'Hall of Taste', a food fair held every two years in Turin, a large, prestigious event that in 1998 recorded over 120,000 visitors. All these events are aimed at keeping "forgotten flavours" alive.

The activities outlined above seek to expand the markets for traditional foods by bringing them to the attention of both local and cosmopolitan consumers. However, since it began to identify the importance of local cuisines in maintaining food diversity, Slow Food has also become aware of the problems faced by the producers and processors of typical products. It has therefore begun to play a more direct role in the protection and promotion of such products under an initiative called the 'Ark of Taste'. The 'Ark' was launched in

the late 1990s to “save from extinction” such typical foods as cured meats, cheeses, cereals, vegetables, and local breeds (Slow Food, 2000). To assist this activity an Advisory Commission (composed of researchers, journalists and other food ‘experts’) was formed in order to evaluate products proposed for inclusion in the ‘Ark’. The Commission was charged with gathering information on the processing, cultivation or breeding techniques, and commercial potential of the products and also with developing intervention strategies to facilitate their “rescue”. As part of this project, Slow Food has begun a major ‘census’ of quality small-scale agro-industrial production and has encouraged Slow Food *osterie* and *trattorie* (i.e. those listed in *Osterie d’Italia*) to include the products in their dishes. The aim is to “protect the small purveyors of fine food from the deluge of industrial standardisation”. To assist these small purveyors the movement has launched another organisational tier at the local level (called ‘Presidia’). These local ‘Ark’ groups are charged with providing various types of practical assistance to small producers of typical products (e.g. organising commercial workshops, identifying new marketing channels)<sup>10</sup>. This is arguably a ‘practical aesthetics’ in action.

In sum, Slow Food aims to challenge the diffusion of a fast-food culture by asserting an alternative aesthetics of food production, preparation and consumption. Starting from the acknowledgement that food is imbued with symbolic meanings and that patterns of food consumption have evolved over time according to the gradual evolution of specific tastes, Slow Food promotes the values of typical products and regional cuisines because they reflect cultural “arts of living”. As Capatti (1999 p.4) puts it, “food is a cultural heritage and should be consumed as such”. Thus, for Slow Food an aesthetic appreciation of food requires an appreciation of the temporal flow of food from the past into the present. ‘Slow food’, in Capatti’s view (ibid. p.5) “is profoundly linked to the values of the past. The preservation of typical products, the protection of species from genetic manipulation, the cultivation of memory and taste education – these are all aspects of this passion of ours for time”.

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<sup>10</sup> A closely linked initiative is “Slow Food Award”, first given in October 2000 in Bologna. The award was given to biologists, fishermen, and small-scale entrepreneurs whose work helps defend the world’s biodiversity. And, in a conscious emulation of McDonald’s Slow Food is about to establish a “Slow University’ which aims to spread good practice in relation to the growing, processing, preparation and consumption of typical products.

In recognising the temporal flow that brings food into the present, Slow Food promotes both a reflexive attitude to food products, notably through the work of its publishing house, and an immersion in the complex the web of relations that invariably surround such products through a direct engagement with the complexity of cuisine. The aesthetic of immersion spans both social and natural dimensions of food. Slow Food says:

“If we wish to enjoy the pleasure which this world can give us, we have to give of our all to strike the right balance of respect and exchange with nature and environment. This is why we like to define ourselves as ‘eco-gastronomes’. The fact is that our pleasure cannot be disconnected from the pleasure of others, but it is likewise connected to the equilibrium we manage to preserve (and in many cases revive) with the environment we live in”.

The aesthetic sensibility of Slow Food thus combines awareness of the cultural significance of typical products (in the context of regional cuisines) with a sensitivity the natural relations that extend out from individual products into the wider ecosystem. In other words, Slow Food gives rise to an ‘eco-gastronomic’ aesthetic.

#### 4. Some concluding comments

The aestheticisation of food is not a recent process. For as long as humans have produced and prepared food, an aesthetic component has been evident. This is perhaps because as Fine (1996 p.13) says, “food involves more sensory dimensions than any other art form”. And according to Parasecoli (2001 p. 69), all the senses are involved in some way in the appreciation of food quality:

“Smell...allows us to perceive the different ingredients and stimulates us to excrete substances like saliva that precede digestion...Appreciation related to touch is based on differences in texture and temperature....The sense that is least involved in eating is beyond doubt hearing, which is employed only in the case of crunchy textures and slurping sounds. [But] eating (in a cultural sense) is impossible without taste...[there are] primary tastes (sweet, salty, acid, bitter) and nuances (tart, astringent, spicy, balsamic – for which there does no yet exist a

satisfactory categorisation) [and] appreciation of harmony between elements which is primarily intellectual”.

As Parasecoli goes on to say, beyond these elements “there is something more to food” (ibid. p.71), something connected to experience, cultural belonging and the way foods are ordered within our cultural worlds. It is this “something more” that comprises the practical aesthetics of food production, preparation and consumption.

These considerations indicate that food quality combines reflective judgement and sensory immersion; it entails some distancing of foods as we appreciate their qualities and some genuine interaction between subject (the consumer) and object (the food). But quality is not static, it shifts sometimes in fluid and flexible ways. In our own times the assertion of quality takes place in a context where industrialised processes have generated an abundance of products. Yet, despite the sophisticated nature of productive processes and the large number of food products now available, concerns about quality remain high. These concerns are further heightened as foods appear to carry greater and greater risks. In the face of such scares as BSE or chemical poisoning consumers turn away from industrial products to seek out more traditional forms of food quality.

Slow Food articulates an alternative set of quality concerns for those consumers suspicious of the industrial approach to food provisioning. Slow Food thus voices implicit and explicit criticisms of the ‘massification of taste’. These criticisms are articulated along two dimensions. Firstly, the *aesthetic* dimension: Slow Food sees food as an important feature of the quality of life, therefore the pleasure it gives is its most important characteristic. As the Slow Food Manifesto puts it, the aim is to promulgate a new “philosophy of taste” and the guiding principle is to “conviviality and the right to taste and pleasure”. The pleurability of food is derived from the aesthetic aspects of production, processing, and consumption. All these activities are considered ‘artful’; they require skill and care and evolve by building on the knowledges of the past to meet the new social needs of contemporary consumers. The second dimension is *ethical*: typical products are part of more environmentally sustainable systems of production, since they

are best suited to local circumstances. They are also relevant in terms of a more ethically informed consumption because they are mostly produced by small independent producers and represent a way to support local economies.

In a variety of ways, Slow Food illustrates how quality can be allied to a ‘practical aesthetic’ (an “eco-gastronomic aesthetic”), one that seeks to strengthen the cultural and environmental relationships that have traditionally underpinned typical products and cuisines. In this respect, Slow Food aims to counter the further rationalisation of food production and consumption by re-embedding products in complex socio-environmental contexts. It responds to the crisis of “second modernity” (seen by Beck and others in terms of increased “risk”) by highlighting the “quiet material pleasure” (as the Slow Food manifesto puts it) that comes from an immersion in local and regional cuisines. This pleasure combines an appreciation of typical tastes with an appreciation of the social and natural relations that produce such tastes.

The case of Slow Food thus bears out our earlier claims that an aesthetics of food in the context of “third modernity” entails a reflexive appreciation of quality, where quality combines both the intrinsic properties of food commodities and the way these properties derive from cultural and natural connections. In other words, this notion of quality sees connectedness *per se* as a virtue. Thus, rather than severing the relationship between commodity and context (as is so often the case in the instrumentalised food markets constructed by economic rationalities), quality here refers to the associations that exist between food and the spatial and temporal conditions of its production, preparation and consumption. By provoking consumers to ‘immerse’ themselves in these associations, this approach to quality therefore signifies the importance of an aesthetic engagement with the complex socio-natural collectives in which typical foods are increasingly set.

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