

THE REINVENTION OF FOOD | **Cristina Grasseni**, Utrecht University | **Heather Paxson**, Massachusetts Institute of Technology with Jim Bingen, Michigan State University | Amy J. Cohen, Ohio State University | Susanne Freidberg, Dartmouth College | Harry G. West, SOAS, University of London

Introducing a Special Issue on the Reinvention of Food: Connections and Mediations

Abstract: This introduction to a special issue forwards “the reinvention of food” as an analytical framework within which to make sense, together, of current projects valorizing “traditional” methods of food production as well as efforts to reimagine more sustainable or transparent food provisioning schemes.

Keywords: authenticity, markets, provisioning, accountability, “good” food.

IN 1970, MARGARET MEAD described American popular notions of nutrition as dominated by a dichotomy between “food that was ‘good for you, but not good’” and “food that was ‘good, but not good for you’” (1970: 179). Today, that dichotomy appears increasingly old fashioned. More and more, we see people—and not only in the United States—working to align the various vectors of food’s “goodness” such that it might point the way toward an optimal diet, or to a perfect food. But what, nowadays, makes food *good*?

Searching beyond taste, even beyond nutrition and health benefits, the eaters who populate the articles in this issue track food’s affordability and accessibility, the authenticity of customary familiarity—even methods of production and provisioning—in evaluating food’s relative “goodness.” Political empowerment, social justice, and environmental resilience are increasingly upheld alongside flavor and skilled culinary preparation as criteria of “quality” foods. While multifaceted and translocal, this surge of popular interest in food—and especially in the ways food is manufactured, distributed, and consumed—calls out for a unified analysis, one we offer through the lens of “the reinvention of food.” *Reinvention* is meant here both as “rediscovery,” as in the revival of dishes and culinary techniques from generations past, and also as “renewing the foundation of,” or shoring up familiar methods and modes of food production so that they remain viable under new political, regulatory, and market regimes. Reinvention does not create things anew, *sui generis*; rather, it gives new form and significance to food substances, senses, and practices that may seem reflexively familiar to some, while curiously exotic to others.

In her 2007 book, Cristina Grasseni first proposed “the reinvention of food” to characterize the novel interest in local

food that she observed ethnographically in the realm of alpine cheese cultures. For the upland communities of northern Italy in which Grasseni worked, refocusing economic efforts on producing local cheeses meant transforming artisanal traditions that had been tied to local seasonality and transhumance routes and reconfiguring them in light of new technologies and audit cultures. Such transformations were set in motion by recent European Union health and safety legislation, by the intensification of globalized markets and consumer interest in culinary niches, and by accelerating techno-scientific innovation in practices of cattle breeding, dairy farming, and cheesemaking (on the latter, see Grasseni 2009).¹

In response to such broader transformations, local dairy producers began to recast their alpine cheeses as distinctive items of local “food heritage.” As we are seeing across the globe, they did so as a self-conscious development strategy, expecting this approach to increase economic opportunities for local entrepreneurs and to boost the economic fortune of rural communities that had been geographically and economically marginalized. In order to attract new customers and tourists, however, the cheesemakers also found they needed to mobilize marketing rhetoric and a poetics of authenticity in ways often incongruous with the actual processes of transformation reshaping their food production practices and the cultural landscapes these practices help to contour (see also West and Domingos 2012). Even so, while artisan producers and family farmers found it personally taxing to balance day-to-day production routines with demands for the performance of authenticity so pleasing to “alternative” consumers, many also found it financially rewarding (Grasseni 2011; see also Paxson 2010, 2013). Similar signs of

ambivalence mixed with pragmatism, we find, characterize many local responses to global food systems.

Material transformations in food production—as dictated by interstate trade agreements and international safety legislation, the niche demands of an increasingly global consumer market, and techno-scientific innovations—create challenges for social and cultural resilience and raise civic questions of self-determination and socioeconomic empowerment (Wilk 1996). Increasingly, the latter is understood not as the exclusive concern of food *consumers* but also as a real issue affecting small-scale *producers*. While paying a “fair price” still means a price that seems reasonable to a cost-conscious consumer, today it can also refer to a price that fairly compensates the skilled labor of production. Over the past decade, networks of consumers have begun to articulate new cultures of provisioning that envisage a direct, generative collaboration between purchasers and producers, rather than assuming that producers and consumers are inevitably pitched against one another in economic antagonism (Roos et al. 2007).

This, too, is a key instance of “the reinvention of food”: situated alongside or moving beyond concerns for food heritage are critical consumers who are experimenting with new lifestyles and social relations bound up in alternative means of food provisioning (Micheletti 2003). Such networks may seek organic, biodynamic, fair trade, zero-mile, bartered, or self-produced groceries and foodstuffs, or combinations of such preferences and commitments, which they perceive as alternatives to dominant, global, corporate food systems (Halkier et al. 2007). Alternative food networks may thrive in municipalities that offer space, visibility, and support to grassroots economy initiatives, and in return, grassroots food initiatives may bring entrepreneurial opportunities and new tourists and residents to depressed rural economies.

Under the umbrella of “the reinvention of food” and through comparative study of craft production and grassroots provisioning schemes across North America, Europe, and into the Middle East, this special issue explores connections between the revival of artisanal food production and the development of alternative food networks or local provisioning schemes (see Grasseni 2013, esp. chap. 2). We aim to highlight to what extent, and under what conditions, food production and provisioning might straddle the reciprocity of gift exchange and the competitive market logics of commodity production to bring “good” or “better” food to more people. After all, reinvented foods require reinvented markets if entrepreneurial experiments are to succeed. The reinventions of food described in this issue are not about reinventing food itself. Rather, these are projects to forge, refashion, and expand relationships and

institutions so people can *better* procure the same old things they have eaten and drunk for generations, if not millennia: olive oil, bread, pork, mezcal, milk.

But what constitutes *better*?

Re-envisioning Food Ethics

This collection expands the scholarship on craft production and alternative provisioning to show that the tent of “better” food is big, but anchored by common ethical concerns. In these articles, we are introduced to people who want meaningful and secure work. They want stronger and more sustaining connections to traditions, places, and communities. In the routines of shopping, cooking, and eating, they want less anxiety and more pleasure. They want less doubt, more trust. At the same time, better provisioning would seem also to generate better food. But when food’s goodness is so multifaceted—there is taste, to be sure, but also nutrition and health benefit, affordability and accessibility, the authenticity of customary familiarity, and the ethics of production methods and provisioning—it is little wonder there is so much handwringing in contemporary food politics, let alone grocery shopping.

Collectively, these papers advance the discussion of *ethics* in contemporary food systems beyond commonplace questions of ethical consumption and debates over whether particular foods are “good” or “bad” in any absolute sense. In the stories these papers tell and in the analyses they advance, we see evidence of the moral sensibilities and ethical choices of producers as well as consumers; their practices and preferences remind us that ethics is not merely a matter of “making the right choice” at key moments of decision, but instead can refer to a holistic set of values that permeate quotidian practice, to become a matter of everyday sensibility: an *ethos*. Ethical consumption, then, might settle into moral economy if and when it sheds the claim to extraordinary achievement and becomes commonsense collective practice, no longer “alternative” to some objectionable norm. But that is not our argument here.

We wish to move beyond all-or-nothing questions of whether particular foods are either good or bad to consume, or made well or poorly, by refusing the (supposed) autonomous decision-making individual—“free” to choose precisely what and how much he or she does and does not eat—as our primary unit of analysis. Rather, we view eaters as always in relation to feeders and to other eaters, as well as embedded in contexts of production and consumption that constrain the array of “choices” available to make.

Taken together, the articles gathered here move beyond normative questions of food ethics in three ways. First, they keep in view the contexts of political economy and state sovereignty in which food systems operate in order to remain mindful of the uneven terrain on which perceptions of “good” food and “good” lives, for eaters and producers alike, take shape. But at the same time, such large-scale perspectives must also consider that the diverse actors who deal daily with food—farmers, refiners, home- and farmworkers, distributors, merchants, restaurant owners, shopkeepers, cooks, and of course, consumers—inevitably, and often self-consciously, have their hands in pressing political issues of governance and equity, concerns over cultural identity in a modern world, and contests over land use and the preservation of (bio)diversity. Second, we advocate analyses that remain mindful of the limits of human agency in generating (or compromising) the “goodness” in food by being attuned to local, multispecies “ecologies of production” which recognize the generative contributions of animals, microorganisms, and ecological webworks in coproducing food with humans (see Paxson 2013). An ecology of production perspective knows not to take “nature” for granted as a bountiful, beneficent resource for human cultural production; “nature” may itself be in need of protection, renewal—even reinvention—in order to continue to be “naturally” generative of food and other human goods. Third, in the works collected here the authors listen ethnographically for a deliberative approach toward food that may be ambivalent, even contradictory, and yet ethically minded. We are interested in people’s moral struggles with and through food; the resolution of such struggle is not required for people, or their decisions, to be counted as “moral.”

Written by anthropologists and sociologists and based primarily on original ethnographic research, the articles in this collection offer compelling insights into how ordinary people, living under late neoliberal conditions, aim to act as moral agents as they engage in market exchange (cf. Gibson-Graham 2006). Through ethnographies of processing, purchasing, consuming, and coproducing food, the authors explore how people strive to create self and social relations of dignity, trust, solidarity, and self-care. To that end, they also animate the different kinds of political possibilities, as well as political limitations, made possible by moral labor.

The Politics of Connection and Mediation

Practitioners themselves often articulate the reinvention of food in terms of efforts to (*re-*)connect to food and, through food, to one another as well as to selective pasts and potential

futures. Some, like the snout-to-tail pork consumers in North Carolina of whom Brad Weiss writes, seek unabashedly emotional food connections, wanting to know what the animals they eat have eaten as well as under what conditions they have lived and died; Weiss suggests that similar sentiment motivates chefs who take pride in witnessing—even participating in—the slaughter of the animals whose flesh they will cook and serve. The Latvian bakers described by Guntra Aistara connect themselves and their consumers with their sweet-and-sour-dough bread by evoking ties with generations past who have bequeathed them the wooden *abra* in which their dough is mixed, suggesting that the *abra* houses the “soul” of the bread which, like their forebears, they will incorporate into their own bodies. Others are keen to engage the moral or political entanglements that bring particular foods to some, if not others. In postsocialist Bulgaria, an unregulated drive for profit has produced a state of affairs where much food is fake, risks are undisclosed, and information is unreliable. Yuson Jung describes how Bulgarians use morality as a language to demand an economy of quality. For them, this means not only markets held together by more solid social ties, but also a state vulnerable to social shame. In postindustrial Detroit, by contrast, we see morality turning inward. Here, moral logics animate not only the form of goods distributed—for example, whether they are real or fake—but also the *processes* of market exchange. For resource-constrained shoppers, Whole Foods Market offers food at better quality, and likely also better prices, than the convenience stores that populate American food deserts. But, more significantly, Whole Foods offers socially marginalized shoppers a way of being in “the market” that feels legitimate—indeed, normal—because it encourages care, rather than exploitation, of the self.

The empirical research behind these articles reveals how the connections people seek to and through food are always *mediated*. They are mediated through material objects and technologies, such as the wooden *abra* cherished—or rediscovered—by Latvian bakers, or the refrigerated “ATMs,” discussed by Cristina Grasseni, from which northern Italians might procure raw cow’s milk; they are mediated through the sensory and digestive apparatuses of our bodies; they are mediated through markets and other social relationships, both the carefully cultivated and the obscured; and they are mediated through state regulations and institutions—or a lack thereof.

Sarah Bowen and Danny Hamrick introduce us to the Denomination of Origin, a state-supported institution that ostensibly protects and promotes “authentic” mezcal and the small-scale Mexican producers that make it. But the DO has historically been dominated by larger-scale export-oriented producers whose drive for efficiencies led them to propose

modifications of the rules that favor industrial operations, and who sought to eliminate competition from smaller-scale producers (whose methods of production they cast as unhygienic) by reserving for themselves the use of the plant name from which mezcal is made, *agave*. Here, state mediation of market connections comes off as well-intentioned, yet weak in the face of international trading interests.

The situation in postsocialist Europe looks quite different. Yuson Jung's interlocutors in Bulgaria and Diana Mincyte's interlocutors in Lithuania desire a state that cares precisely so that they can be included and recognized for something other than their "own hard labor." In this way, self-reliance is not experienced as an agentic political aspiration to be cultivated on a small and local scale, as it is, say, for Brooklynites who smuggle raw milk across state lines. Rather, as Mincyte argues, the moral practices of environmental and social stewardship that animate raw milk markets in Lithuania fill a void that is experienced in terms of entrenched inequalities and a politics of insignificance. In Italy, meanwhile, state-sanctioned freestanding milk-dispensing machines ("ATMs") described by Grasseni offer an intriguing answer to the moral and techno-scientific question of how to care for the risks posed by consuming raw milk. By imprinting its regulatory authority on the milk ATM, the Italian state has enabled producers and consumers to create local trust economies through which they can practice self-care. And yet both localness and trust are unstable concepts—vulnerable to state as well as technocratic mediation and redefinition.

Grasseni juxtaposes the state-sanctioned milk ATMS to Italian grassroots Solidarity Purchase Groups, or "GAS," which she depicts as an experiment in democratizing both markets and techniques of market regulation. As actual social networks that work mainly on a face-to-face basis, GAS require constant and iterative labor in order to construct markets as trustworthy and hence "local" spaces. Consumers become "coproducers" of food by investing in the cost as well as the means of its production. Whereas neoliberal governance has created an elaborate apparatus of third-party surveillance mechanisms designed to monitor markets from above, here monitoring involves social labor to create solidaristic forms of community as well as to gather and distribute trustworthy information. As market actors, GAS activists disavow the neoliberal injunction to innovate at an ever-expanding scale. Perhaps for this reason, they do not aim to enlist the state in institutional change. On the contrary, their politics are grounded in the possibility of transformative social and economic relations, or connections, produced through particular networks of exchange—albeit ideally networks that might be replicated in other spaces.

At the opposite spectrum of reinventing food through civic participation, we find Sarah Lyon's discussion of GoodGuide, an online application that enables consumers to access select health, environmental, and social performance ratings of thousands of products common on American supermarket shelves. Although the designers of GoodGuide promote its "potential opportunities" to build transnational communities around alternative, organic, and ethical foods and to foster direct consumer action to bring about real change in food supply chains, Lyon observes that the lack of transparency and absence of consumer participation in the design of the standards, the selective nature of information provided, and the proprietary and deliberately opaque assessment process all severely limit these opportunities. In fact, the citizenship model exemplified by GoodGuide raises a number of ethical, conceptual, and operational problems. How might the Internet alter "the link between proximity and transparency by fostering the creation of an alternative public sphere"? Can, or how might, we begin to conceive of an "Internet-enabled politics of food"? Doing so will require moving from "democracy lite," as represented by GoodGuide, to deeper democratic engagement. At a minimum, citizenship means that individuals are enabled to understand themselves as members of a community engaged in a collective undertaking. The challenge is to move deliberately to food-related behavior that would support the development of a democratically connected, socially and economically just food system.

Connections and their mediations, however, remain vulnerable to ruptures and disruptions. Nowhere is this more apparent in this special issue than in occupied Palestine. Anne Meneley writes of the *Sharaka* guerilla gardeners and CSA members who work personally and politically to preserve their Palestinian agricultural heritage. While sharing some of the same civic aspirations as the Italian GAS activists, Palestinian food activists invoke authenticity in face of a "local" that is being eroded before their eyes. Their gardening is a clear political act of nonviolent resistance to Israeli occupation. They work deliberately to raise public awareness of a food-sovereign Palestine—one based on *baladi*, an idea of the "intimate connection" between the Palestinian people, their land, and the agriculture that sustains them in their homeland. As Meneley notes, "food sovereignty is essential as a tactic for surviving" despite the absence of political sovereignty.


The *Sharaka* movement—especially when juxtaposed with underground raw-milk markets, GAS activists, and GoodGuide—highlights critical questions that must be posed to all those operating under a food sovereignty banner. In what ways do "food citizen" movements deliberately

seek to define and advance their rights and responsibilities to control their food and farming in a particular place? To what extent do food movements offer their members the opportunities to practice the skills of direct democracy? What is the evidence that groups promote the interests of members and that their leaders are accountable to those who chose and support them?

This special issue highlights the complementary aspects of connection and mediation in the reinvention of food. Although the essays in this collection focus on artisanal producers and local provisioning schemes, it is important to note that the quest to procure better food through better connections is more widespread. In her current research with corporate life-cycle assessment teams, for example, Susanne Freidberg hears sentiments quite similar to those voiced in the pages of this journal issue, but from people who work within the very industrial food system that the artisanal and alternative movements would seek to circumvent. They, too, talk about how much trust matters in global supply chains, about what they find intellectually, socially, and even morally rewarding about their job in a major multinational company. Certainly, some have been hired to say socially responsible things, and to figure out how their companies can capture some of the warm feelings and spending now directed toward the small, slow, and artisanal. But we are inclined to take seriously their talk of trust and connection; it reaffirms that the concerns fueling contemporary food reinvention projects are, at root, hardly niche. Such talk also signals that reinvention is taking place within the food industry itself, not just in opposition to it. Reasons for skepticism abound: generally framed as “sustainability” projects, corporate food reinventions mainly aim to sustain brand value and the natural resources it depends on. But these projects merit more scholarly attention, not least because they hint at opportunities—for more leverage, for greater concessions, for changes leading, ultimately, to the much broader, more equitable reach of better provisioning.

Bringing concepts of power to discussions of food may be among one of the more important and challenging endeavors in thinking about the reinvention of food. Power-laden concepts—food sovereignty, food citizens and citizenship, food democracy—offer fresh opportunities to connect theoretical perspectives more systematically in framing our discussions of food politics. In the articles that follow, the emergent themes of *authenticity*, *trust*, and *sovereignty*—each a manifestation of connection to and through food—raise the question of whether and to what extent individuals are variously enabled to understand themselves as members of a community engaged in a collective undertaking. The challenge for food politics is to move deliberately to food-related behavior

that would support the development of transparent, socially integrated, democratically determined, and economically just food systems. The open question, of course, is which mediations—which social networks, production practices, legislative initiatives, or digital media platforms—can actually stimulate a recursive and integrated discussion, and action, on rights and responsibilities in relation to food behaviors.

Not all the desired “connections” that food and eating afford will lead directly to democratic outcomes, to be sure. Since the “goodness” people seek in food is manifold, this is not itself cause for concern. Still, critical studies of food reinvention will continue to benefit from addressing the issues of power and justice in how food making and provisioning are culturally configured as a meaningful act. 

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NOTE

1. Directive 43 of the (then) European Economic Community introduced mandatory HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) for all European commercial food producers in 1993, while Regulation no. 178 established the European Food Safety Authority in 2002, enunciating common principles and definitions to guarantee the free circulation of food within the European Union.

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