

Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage, (eds.) Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael A. Di Giovine (Farnham, Surrey & Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2014)

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The process of identity formation is fraught with contradiction as it is subject to copious intervening dynamics and changing signifying practices. An exercise in fluidity, added to its already slippery discursive slope is that definitions of culture, as Stuart Hall advises, go beyond meanings and values into spaces where emphasis is placed on the ever-changing historical narrative (with its marginalised discourses and silences) as well as lived experience and lived traditions and the ways in which these are expressed and embodied. And Hobsbawm and Ranger clearly warned that the very entity nominated as a tradition needed closer interrogation as the element of invention problematises its very credentials. Hence arising constructs such as heritage are made more complex as notions of the idealised past are re/packaged and re/narrated, often through the chronicle of tourism.

It is against this background of complex discourses that the contributors to the new collection of essays present their narratives. Entitled *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage*, the collection is skilfully edited by Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael A. Di Giovine. By engaging food and foodways as the lens through which they provide readings of identity, what is clearly

demonstrated is that these are sites of contestation where despite all attempts at fixity, meanings are in a constant state of flux. The volume provides the reader with the opportunity to engage with discourses such as who creates notions of the 'local', 'ethnic', 'national' or *terroir* and for what purpose? Further, to what extent does the consumption of the identity (both symbolically and literally) challenge any questions of its 'authenticity'? And with the UNESCO *Representative List of Intangible Heritage* forming the immediate backdrop for the majority of discussions, the reader is also invited to assess the ways in which the *Intangible Heritage List* has been used to intervene in, re/shape, or completely rework what becomes known as 'culinary heritage'.

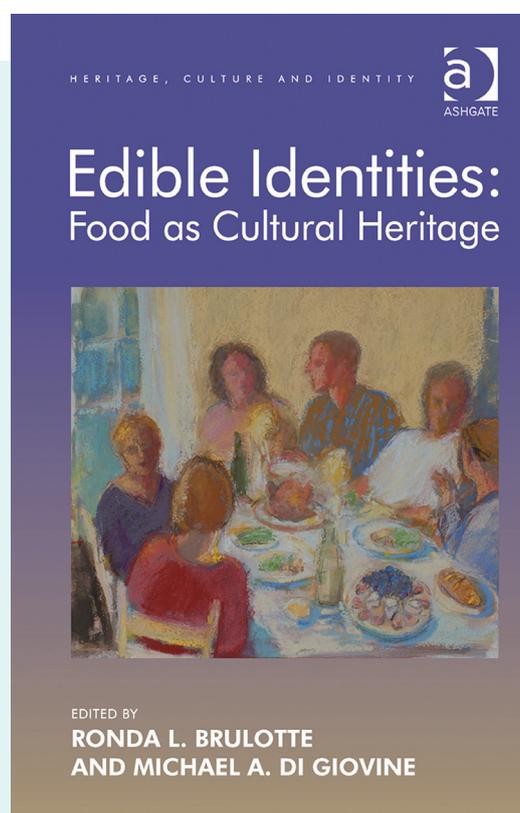
Comprising fourteen essays, the reader traverses through constructs of heritage through food across Europe, South and North America, with one stop in Japan. Arguably the collection placed emphasis on cuisines first recognised by UNESCO, i.e. French, Mediterranean and Mexican, with the additional review of spaces in, for example, the United States, Bolivia, Slovenia and Kyoto, Japan. With the comprehensive introductory chapter entitled 'Food and Foodways as Cultural Heritage', the editors address some of the

concerns within the debates of not only heritage, but also within this most recent enterprise known as the heritage industry, with its opposing political and economic dimensions. They also give insight into the history and evolving perspectives resulting from the implementation of the UNESCO *Intangible Heritage List*. The essays that follow offer an analysis utilising what could be championed as 'thick description' as many bring detailed readings to the issues emanating from the case studies.

The numerous essays do not allow for a detailed analysis of each within the constraints of space accorded to this review. Hence, a selection of key socio-cultural spaces will be considered to provide some understanding into debates in the collection. For example, Miha Kozorog raises questions of identity and authenticity in the article on Salamander Brandy in which it is proposed that the very entity that provides the basis for the identity, the brandy itself, is a myth. The reader is then encouraged to debate the extent to which identity can be constructed and sustained despite mounting evidence that its very foundations, or the

meanings upon which the narrative evolved, in this case the immersion of the salamander in the process of making the Slovenian brandy, can be challenged.

Ronda Brulotte and Alvin Starkham invite discussion on the validity of a construct of culinary heritage that purports to be uniquely indigenous to the Oaxaca region in Mexico and is marketed as a key signifier of authenticity for the lucrative culinary tourist industry. Yet the food practices and traditions can be claimed by several indigenous peoples and the signature dish for restaurants in Caldo de Piedra is a highly contested entity. And what of the llama meat that is now served as a curry in restaurants catering to tourist appetites in Tiwanaku, Bolivia, a village whose populations did not know of its consumption as a lived tradition or lived experience as it was never served in the home? Not only is llama meat now imported from the city into the village for sale to the tourists, but, as Clare Sammells demonstrates, the llama and its meat is constructed as part of the rural heritage and has become the important signifier of identity.



Similarly, with the argument that organic factors such as the soil and the water in Kyoto unquestionably determine the superior taste of its vegetables, Greg de St. Maurice highlights the tensions that arise for representations of Japanese culinary identity. The exercise of re/crafting and re/branding of, for example, the much treasured Kyoto eggplant and sweet pepper, results in the ultimately conflicting constructs of what is authentic Japanese cuisine. Psyche Williams-Forsen also challenges constructs of authenticity in her exploration of the formation of African Diasporic identities and resulting culinary legacies. Emphasising the historical narratives of African enslavement and the subsequent migrations of peoples of African descent both to and within America, she proposes that concepts such as 'African', 'Caribbean', 'Gullah' or 'soul' food actively problematise constructs of ethnic identities, while simultaneously providing avenues for exploration of food as heritage.

And the investigation by Michael Di Giovine of the food practices of the southern Italian town of Pietrelcina, reveals that new meanings can evolve for food items, such as machine-prepared pasta, for both tourists and locals alike. The inhabitants of the town would probably have summarily dismissed these constructs of their edible identities as the pasta is not homemade, and is not the legacy of recipes treasured by the families who have lived in the town for generations. Incredibly, or as Di Giovine argues extraordinarily, it was the convergence of circumstances, principally the elevation of one of the inhabitants of Pietrelcina to sainthood, that sparked the enterprise of religious tourism for the town, that in turn enabled the production of what became heritage cuisine, which in Italy can be stereotypically represented by, for

example, pasta, machine-made or not. Moreover, other traditional foods that had gone out of use were revived, re-invented and incorporated into some of the cultural practices of the inhabitants of the town, such as feasts, sparking even further debates on the question of the fluid process of identity formation.

It can be noted that several of the articles in the collection address concepts such as 'heritagisation' and 'traditional delicacies' as well as the elements of 'innovation', 'continuity' and 'revitalisation'. And Erick Castellanos and Sarah Bergstresser wrestle with the debates surrounding food as cultural heritage and food as commodity as they examine the future of corn communities in Mexico and the lived tradition of corn, in the face of US corn production on an increasing scale and GMO food production.

Yet, hovering throughout the volume is the understanding that food as a construct for identity is heavily impacted by the processes of globalisation in addition to the ways in which local communities attempt to treat their lived traditions and engage in an understanding of what they may choose to identify as their culinary heritage. Perhaps for future publications, other foods and foodways across Asia and the Pacific and the continent of Africa and the Caribbean region, for example, could be examined. Such inclusion and assessment would further enrich what has been demonstrated here to be a fascinating discourse. Indeed, *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage* is a must-read for all who engage in the politics of identity formation and would be of especial interest for scholars in critical heritage studies and cultural studies. 🇬🇧