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Flavia Cavaliere  
**Thought for Food**





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*To Giuseppe, Domitilla and Flaminia*



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# Introduction

My first *thought for food* is for children on the brink of starvation.

How do we define food? Even in today's ultra-connected and globalized world, food is one of those terms which evokes various things in different people. Food cannot be simply considered as a means of survival related to our physical sustenance but must be framed within a socio-cultural set of values, for which there is considerable ethnographic evidence.

Over the past few decades, an ever-increasing interest in food has contributed to the shedding of light on the complexity and socio-cultural implications of food events. The plethora of cookbooks and food magazines, worldwide culinary festivals, TV shows, celebrity chefs, blogs and podcasts, all witness the food mania of the twenty-first century and have altogether completely changed the perception of food and given it new significance. Food has even become a critical subject of observation and academic interest<sup>1</sup>, and has been (and is still being) analysed from trans-disciplinary fields embracing, among many others, Economics, Cultural Studies, Sociology, Aesthetics, Anthropology, Psychology, and Archaeology. Investigations may range from environment and sustainability to different dietary patterns, from semiotics to marketing and gastrolingo<sup>2</sup>, from (g)local food and small-scale agriculture<sup>3</sup> to literature, from agribiotechnology to media representations, from advertising to mythology,

1. Consider, for instance, Penny Van Esterik, who is Professor of Anthropology at York University in Toronto, Canada, where she teaches Nutritional Anthropology.

2. "Gastrolingo is a specific micro-linguistic variety used in the tourism field to describe culinary traditions". G. DANN, *The Language of Tourism: a Sociolinguistic Perspective*. CAB International, Wallingford 1996, p. 235.

3. Cairns and Johnston (2015) and Beagan (2017), among others, have recently analyzed food as a means of producing vital socio-economic and cultural networks among people(s) and countries. See K. CAIRNS AND J. JOHNSTON *Food and Femininity*. Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2015. See also B.L. BEAGAN et al., *Acquired Tastes: Why Families Eat the Way They Do*. UBC Press, Vancouver 2015.

from religious to medical and psychological perspectives<sup>4</sup>, which may include fasting practices, eating disorders or 'gastrophysics'.

This volume neither claims to consider all potential food-related topics, nor to be exhaustive about the topics that have been chosen and dealt with, but it aims to provide some 'food for thought', or better, some 'thought(s) for food'.

The whole study intends to offer clues for the investigation of how people(s) and/or individuals negotiate their identity (or identities) — and/or the way in which they can be perceived by others — by means of the semiotic and symbolic power of food discourse. More specifically, from a wide cross-cultural/communicative perspective, in the first section of this volume, the dynamical interplay of some of the above-mentioned cultural, symbolical, socio-economical, emotional and religious values — all merging in food discourse — is considered. The second section mostly focuses on food language(s) as related to (some of) the many metaphorical and identitarian values of food, together with an in-depth analysis of the ways in which food terms are/may be translated.

4. The emotional functions fulfilled by food have been aptly analyzed among many by J. JOHNSTON, S. BAUMANN, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*, Routledge, New York 2010.

PART I

THE FOOD LEGACY  
AND ITS SYMBOLIC MEANINGS



## The Semiosis of Food

Food language is “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviors”<sup>1</sup> which is crucial to defining a group’s ethnicity and reinforcing its identity, and, at the same time, to set the manner in which a group is perceived from the exterior. The fine-grained analysis of (some of) the many multifaceted lingua-cultural values of food can contribute in an essential manner to unveiling the symbolic and identitarian importance of food events, a significance which goes far beyond the physiological act of feeding oneself, since “Activity, work, sports, effort, leisure, celebration — every one of these situations is expressed through food”<sup>2</sup>.

The works of celebrated anthropologists and scholars — including Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>3</sup>, Mary Douglas<sup>4</sup>, Marvin Harris<sup>5</sup>, Jack Goodie<sup>6</sup>, Eivind Jacobsen<sup>7</sup> and Roland Barthes<sup>8</sup>, to mention only the most well-known — have made key contributions to the topic of food practices and customs and given them new meanings. Their ground-breaking studies have offered new insights into the symbolic and cultural importance of

1. R. BARTHES, *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, in C. COUNIHAN, P. VAN ESTERIK, *Food and Culture: A Reader*, Routledge, New York 2013, pp. 23–30, p. 24.

2. Ivi, p. 27.

3. C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *The Culinary Triangle*, in COUNIHAN C., VAN ESTERIK P. (eds.), *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Routledge, New York 2013, pp. 41–47. See also C. LÉVI-STRAUSS, *The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologiques*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1983.

4. M. DOUGLAS, *Deciphering a Meal. Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology*, Routledge, London 1975.

5. M. HARRIS, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture*, Altamira Press, Walnut Creek 1968.

6. J.G. GOODE et al., *Meal Formats, Meal Cycles and Menu Legislation in the Maintenance of an Italian-American Community*, in M. DOUGLAS (ed.), *Food in the Social Order: Studies of Food and Festivities in Three American Communities*, Russel Sage Foundation, New York 1984, pp. 143–218.

7. E. JACOBSEN, *The Rhetoric of Food*, in M.E LIEN, B. NERLICH, *The Politics of Food*, Berg, Oxford 2004, pp. 59–62.

8. R. BARTHES, *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, 2013, cit.

eating customs and have contributed to highlighting how feeding is a major part of the ensemble of symbols constituting a group's cultural system, and, as such, the ultimate form of cultural heritage. More importantly, they have investigated how we communicate about food and, in turn, how food is communicated and what food communicates.

From a Barthesian perspective, food is seen as a semiotic sign communicating additional meaning(s). "To eat is a behaviour that develops below its own ends, replacing, summing up and signalling other behaviours, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign"<sup>9</sup>. In his pioneering paper "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption"<sup>10</sup>, Barthes claims that when buying food, we buy and consume a whole system or chain of meaning and we experience a system or grammar of food.

When [modern man] buys an item of food, consumes it or serves it, he does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation, it constitutes an information, it signifies. [...] All food serves as a sign among the members of a given society. [...] food is the first need [...] but ever since man has ceased living off wild berries, this need has been highly structured. Substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification.<sup>11</sup>

In his view, an apple is not simply an edible fruit produced by a tree (*Malus domestica*) with more than 7,500 different cultivars worldwide<sup>12</sup>. It also entails production, which, in turn, includes ploughing, watering, harvesting, storage, transportation, marketing, and so on. Additionally, an apple may stand for many different symbols/iconic values, ranging from Snow White<sup>13</sup> to the American multinational technology company headquartered in Cupertino, and, I would add, the golden apples from the Garden of the Hesperides<sup>14</sup>, the

9. Ivi, p. 28.

10. *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* was originally published by Barthes as *Pour une psycho-sociologie de l'alimentation contemporaine* in the 1961 issue of the journal «Annales. Economies, sociétés, civilisations».

11. R. BARTHES, *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, 2013, cit., pp. 21–22.

12. B.E. JUNIPER, D.J. MABBERLEY, *The Story of the Apple*, Timber Press, Portland 2009.

13. As is well-known, in the popular oral tradition of Western fairy tales, Snow White bites into a poisoned apple, which causes her temporary death, followed by a resurrection.

14. In Greek mythology, the Garden of the Hesperides is Hera's orchard in the west, and the Hesperides (whose name originates from *Hesperos*, meaning 'evening') were the nymphs of evening and the golden light of sunsets and the daughters of Atlas, the titan who held the vault of

forbidden fruit of the garden of Eden<sup>15</sup>, and The Beatles' apple trademark as well, to mention but a few<sup>16</sup>.

heaven upon his gigantic and strong shoulders. As the legend goes, when the marriage of Zeus and Hera took place, she was presented with wedding gifts by various deities, and among them were branches with golden apples growing on them, offered by the goddess Gaia. Hera, greatly admiring this nuptial present, wanted the branches planted in her gardens, which extended as far as Mount Atlas. The Hesperides were given the task of tending to the grove, but since they occasionally picked apples from it themselves, Hera, not trusting them, also appointed an immortal, never-sleeping, hundred-headed dragon named Ladon as an additional safeguard of the garden. The garden of the Hesperides is linked to the myth of Heracles, the son of Zeus and Alcmene, possibly the greatest of the Greek legendary heroes, whose legend, as often happens, is reported in different versions. According to the most popular one, Heracles, driven insane by Hera, killed his own children in a confused state of mind, and, as part of his long punishment for his hideous crime, he was forced by his cousin, King Eurystheus, to carry out twelve labours which seemed to be absolutely impossible to accomplish. Heracles' twelfth labour was to find the Garden of the Hesperides and retrieve some golden apples, also called the 'Apples of Immortality', since it was believed that whoever ate of them would become immortal. Heracles learned from Nereus, 'the Old Man of the Sea', or the sea god and a shapeshifter, where the Garden of the Hesperides was located, and in his journey to the Garden, he killed the eagle which, pecking away daily at Prometheus' tortured body, consumed his liver. As a reward, Prometheus, once he had been saved from his horrible fate, advised Heracles not to fetch the apples himself, but to send Atlas, while in the meantime he would carry the weight of heaven for him. Atlas, after receiving a golden apple from his daughters, surprisingly refused to retake the burden of heaven on his shoulders again and, instead, offered to deliver the apples himself, hoping to gain his freedom again. Nonetheless, Heracles conceived a stratagem to get the apple and managed to hasten away to deliver it to Eurystheus. In later years, it was thought that the 'golden apples' might have actually been oranges, a fruit unknown to Europe and the Mediterranean before the Middle Ages. Accordingly, the Greek botanical name chosen for all citrus species was *Hesperidoideî* (Ἑσπεριδοειδῆ, 'hesperidoids'), and even today the Greek word for the orange fruit is *πορτοκάλι* (*portokáli*), named after the country of Portugal in Iberia, near where the Garden of the Hesperides was believed to have been. M. GRANT, J. HAZEL, *Who's who in Classical Mythology*, London, Routledge, 2002.

15. In the Christian tradition, due to a shift in meaning in the Vulgate (the Late Latin translation of the Bible), the apple tree is considered the tree of knowledge and temptation. Adam and Eve, once they had eaten the forbidden fruit, caused 'The Fall of Man'. Yet, as the Book of Genesis reads, no apple is ever mentioned, only 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. According to many scholars, the fruit's popular identification with an apple, which was unknown in the Middle East in biblical times, is possibly due to a confusion between the Latin words *mālum* (an apple) and *mālum* (an evil), each of which is normally written *malum*.

16. Over the centuries, apples have in fact become part of the collective imagination and fuelled numerous stories, ranging from pagan myths to the biblical narrative, from fairy tales to popular legends, in which it is alternatively considered either a promise of youth/immortality and knowledge, or a (poisonous) food (often associated with seduction and femininity) engendering chaos and destruction, as mirrored in the legendary 'apple of discord'. According to one version of this myth, Eris, the goddess of discord, enraged at not having been invited to the wedding of Thetis and Peleus, threw one of the golden apples among the guests. The apple, inscribed with the words "To the fairest", caused turmoil among the crowd and led to the notorious 'Judgement of Paris', where, in order to end the quarrel, he had to choose the most beautiful goddess. As is well-known, Paris gave the golden apple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty and fertility, who, in

In Lévi–Strauss’s view<sup>17</sup>, food and language adhere to the same practices because food is a code that can express patterns about social relationships: “Cooking [...] is with language a truly universal form of human activity: if there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food”<sup>18</sup>.

Food is also recognized as possibly the most crucial expression of cultural identity<sup>19</sup>.

The food system contains and transports the culture of those who practice it; it is a repository for the traditions and identity of a group. It is, therefore, an extraordinary vehicle of self–representation [...]: it is a tool of identity, but also the first way to come into contact with different cultures, since eating other people’s food is easier, at least in appearance, than codifying their language.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, it seems we are witnessing a paradox–like phenomenon. On the one hand, we are living an era in which, globalization, namely “the process of world shrinkage, of distances getting shorter, and things moving closer”<sup>21</sup>, have made different cultures increasingly “interconnected and entangled with each other”<sup>22</sup>. Globalization, with its migratory processes and the breakdown of traditional borders, seems to be leading people(s) towards a transnational and transcultural integration and homogenization of tastes and choices. Additionally, globalization is often read by many as a synonym for ‘Americanization’, it “is in so many ways Americanization: it is about drinking Pepsi and Coke and eating Big Macs”<sup>23</sup>. As

return, promised to give Paris the beautiful Helen of Troy. This would later trigger the Trojan War. In Celtic mythology too, Lugh, one of the most prominent gods, is usually portrayed holding three apples as signs of immortality, power and prosperity. In Snorri’s Edda, a 13th–century collection of Norse myths in prose form, the goddess Iðunn is entrusted as the keeper of the food of the gods, i.e. the apples of immortality. See M. GRANT, J. HAZEL, 2002, *op. cit.*

17. C. LÉVI–STRAUSS, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 1983, cit.

18. C. LÉVI–STRAUSS *The Culinary Triangle*, 2013, cit., p. 40.

19. D. CHANSKY, A. FOLINO WHITE, *Food and Theatre on the World Stage*, Routledge, New York 2015.

20. M. MONTANARI, *Il cibo come cultura*. Laterza, Rome 2004 (my translation).

21. N.R.F. AL–RODHAN, G. STOUDEMANN, *Definitions of Globalization: A Comprehensive Overview and a Proposed Definition*, Geneva Center for Security Policy, Geneva 19 Jun. 2016, p. 5.

22. W. WELSCH, *Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today*, in *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, SAGE Publications Ltd., London 1999, p. 197.

23. R.S. JORDAN *et al.*, *International Organizations: A Comparative Approach to the Management of Cooperation*, Praeger Publishers, Westport 2001.



a consequence, and, not by chance, it is precisely from the globally known American companies McDonalds and Starbucks that the notorious neologisms McDonaldization and Starbuckization<sup>24</sup> have been coined.

These terms indicate the global move from cultures built on local traditions to highly mechanized and homogeneous societies. More precisely, in Ritzer's words, McDonaldization is "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of [...] the world"<sup>25</sup>. New communication patterns, and particularly synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, have unquestionably affected our lives forever and turned the whole world into the notorious global village, which requires one to accommodate oneself to new identities. "Frequent intercultural contacts and migration carry [...] people and recipes across in either direction more than ever before"<sup>26</sup>, enabling the cultural identity of a people to be renewed and enriched through contact with the traditions and values of others.

On the other hand, however, even in this fluid scenario, food and cooking still remain tools of self-representation. Worldwide fast-food chains and their (often frozen) standardized menus could have promoted a process of thorough (culinary) globalization<sup>27</sup>, but, nonetheless, they have not erased peoples' passion for local food. The food system, particularly today, is "the most sensitive and important expression of national culture"<sup>28</sup> through which migrants can strengthen their identity as an ethnic group<sup>29</sup>.

Food is one of the most immediate cultural elements, in which everybody partakes, so it is unsurprising that it is foregrounded in everyday manifestations of identity within the context of migration<sup>30</sup>. Food, in fact, enables people to recall and evoke memories, gestures, histories, and people.

24. G. RITZER, *The McDonaldization of society*, «Journal of American Culture», vol. 6, no.1, Wiley Periodicals Inc. Hoboken 1983, pp. 100–107. See also G. RITZER, *The McDonaldization of Society*, Pine Forge Press, Los Angeles 2008.

25. G. RITZER, *The McDonaldization of Society*, 2008, cit, p. 4.

26. M. PARADOWSKI, *Through catering college to the naked chef – teaching LSP and culinary translation*, in Ł. BOGUCKI (ed.), *Teaching Translation and Interpreting: Challenges and Practices*, Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 2010, p. 138.

27. R. PRAVETTONI, *Il cibo come elemento di identità culturale nel processo migratorio*, 2009. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2otOraa>.

28. P. NEWMARK, *A Textbook of Translation*, Prentice Hall, New York 1988, p. 97.

29. D. LUPTON, *The Body and the Self*, SAGE Publications Ltd., London 1999.

30. J. JOHNSTON, S. BAUMANN, *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*, Routledge, New York 2010.

### 1.1. Food as a Trigger of Memories

“Food techniques have long roots, they are the repository of a whole experience, of the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors, food brings the memory of the soul into our very contemporary life”<sup>31</sup>.

A clear example of this statement is the evocative power of a little spongy French cake which, though not much bigger than a walnut, was able to produce such a flowing deluge of memories that it would fill the seven ponderous volumes of Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. As the French writer described in the well-known literary anecdote at the beginning of his novel, *Swann’s Way*<sup>32</sup>, the simple flavour of a madeleine cake unwittingly triggered the remembrance of an old detailed memory. Through his madeleine, Proust delivered a vivid analysis about how certain objects, tastes and/or odours can recall autobiographic memories/experiences, a property which is in fact referred to as the ‘Proust phenomenon’<sup>33</sup>. As is widely known, as a child, Proust’s aunt used to give him small madeleines dipped into a cup of tea. In his adulthood, Proust realized that the act of eating a madeleine could take him back to the context of his childhood, thus magically breaking the dichotomy between past and present.

She sent for one of those squats, plump little cakes called “petites madeleines”, which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin [...]. And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning

31. R. BARTHES, *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, 2013, cit., p. 27.

32. M. PROUST, *Remembrance of Things Past; Volume 1: Swann’s Way: Within a Budding Grove*. The definitive French Pleiade edition translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. Vintage, New York 1913–27, pp. 48–51.

33. S. CHU, J.J. DOWNES, *Odour-evoked Autobiographical Memories: Psychological Investigations of Proustian Phenomena*, «Chemical Senses», vol. 25, n. 1, February 2000, pp. 111–116.

to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it; perhaps because I had so often seen such things in the meantime, without tasting them, on the trays in pastry-cooks' windows, that their image had dissociated itself from those Combray days to take its place among others more recent; perhaps because of those memories, so long abandoned and put out of mind, nothing now survived [...]. But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.<sup>34</sup>

In a way, 'the Proustian moment' crystallizes the theory of memory and anticipates how memory can become a sensual action, not an intellectual enterprise. Studies in psychology and neuroscience have recently investigated the basic reasons why the perceived stimulus is more powerful in food memories than other memories. Researchers have shown that autobiographical memories evoked by olfactory information are older and described as more vivid than those associated with verbal/visual information. This happens because, of the five senses, smell and taste are those related both with the hippocampus, the part of the brain where the long-term memory is located, and with those areas of the cortex that interact with the hippocampus in the storage of long-term information.

Furthermore, in Prof. Hadley Bergstrom's words, "Taste memories tend to be the strongest of associative memories that you can make [...] also because of 'conditioned taste aversion'"<sup>35</sup>. 'Conditioned taste aversion' is a survival tactic that enables human beings to develop an aversion to a dish, ingredient or even a restaurant for a certain amount of time after they get food poisoning. Owing to this 'conditioned taste aversion', even though we (normally) get sick hours after we have eaten the contaminated food, our body keeps a very long-lasting 'memory' of the sickness and of the nausea-inducing agent(s) in order that we can avoid further food

34. M. PROUST, 1913–27, cit., pp. 48–51.

35. H. BERGSTROM, in J. R. THOMSON, *Psychologists Explain Why Food Memories Can Feel So Powerful*, "HuffPost", 10 May 2017, Available at: [bit.ly/2owI4mG](https://bit.ly/2owI4mG).

poisoning. Albeit from a negative perspective, ‘conditioned taste aversion’ explains how powerful and (sometimes life-long) lasting food memories can be.

Additionally, food memories are not just generated by the senses and survival tactics, but the potential to layer the richness of a food memory is enhanced by the context — the company, the situation and the emotions involved at the time.

The idea of nostalgia is that the sauce [for example] is associated not only with yummy pasta, but also with grandma and her home — that’s because food is so reinforcing. All of these stimuli in the environment become associated with the reinforcing properties of that yummy pasta sauce.<sup>36</sup>

Psychologist and neuroscientist Prof. Susan Withborne also states that

Food memories feel so nostalgic because there’s all this context of when you were preparing or eating this food, so the food becomes almost symbolic of other meaning. [...] A lot of our memories as children, it’s not so much the apple pie, for example, but the whole experience of being a family, being nourished, and that acquires a lot of symbolism apart from the sensory quality.<sup>37</sup>

People may cognitively connect significant past associations with specific foods; for instance, according to Galisson<sup>38</sup>, our craving for ice cream may stem from a desire to recall the light-hearted and merry days of our childhood.

Today, more than ever before, the power of food to restore the thread of memory is being explored and exploited in diverse contexts and (artistic) outputs. Significant examples are provided, for instance, in the United States by Folkstreams<sup>39</sup> documentaries, where unfamiliar worlds, especially those which are now receding into the historical past, are recorded and offered as direct experiences to the widest possible audience. Investigations are conducted, and then filmed, according to different cultural styles in phenomena such as song, dance, storytelling, visual arts, and ceremonies.

36. *Ibidem*.

37. S. WITHBORNE, in J.R. THOMSON, 2017, *op. cit.*

38. K. GALISSON, *Food for comfort*, «Psychology Today», Sussex Publisher, New York 2001.

39. Folkstreams is a non-profit organization dedicated to finding, preserving, contextualizing, and showcasing documentary films on (American) traditional cultures and folklife.