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La Restauration Rapide: An Affront to the Collective Cultural Memory of French Cuisine

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Abstract

A collective cultural memory is established through the evolving interactions and interpretations that a group has with socially contextualized knowledge and experiences. Three elements are necessary: shared history, shared values, and shared language. The cultural construct of French cuisine has been central to its national identity since the early nineteenth century. Yet it has experienced an “assault” from a differing model of production and consumption called *la restauration rapide*. How has France’s *patrimoine culinaire* (re-)interpreted this assault in its collective cultural memory? Reactions include a forged culinary (anti-)identity and a (re-)appropriation of the most offending foodstuff – the hamburger.

La haute cuisine in France developed around the aristocracy and the royal courts in the seventeenth century.¹ By the mid-seventeenth century, not only were intentional connections between cuisine and country being made in cookbooks (with such titles as Varenne’s *Le Cuisinier François* published in 1651), but also authors were stating that French cuisine was different and better than elsewhere.²

Following the French Revolution, French *citoyens* were united in part through the concept of cuisine. This notion would eventually come to serve as a point of national pride for a nation of separate and distinctive regions. Ferguson asserts that in the nineteenth century the culinary arts became symbolic and representative of a culinary culture. As she points out, “a nexus of social, economic, and cultural conditions”³ contributed to this social practice of gastronomy. Publications of personal journals and newspaper articles buttressed this French gastronomic movement both domestically and internationally. Producers and consumers alike explored gastronomy with their intellect as well as their senses by sharing written accounts of these experiences. Today, France’s culinary heritage is understood through its texts (e.g., culinary literary genres), its legislation (e.g., *Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée*), and its language (e.g., *terroir*)⁴.

However, this cultural construct, a well-established collective cultural memory, has been experiencing an “assault” stemming from a differing model of production and consumption known as *la restauration rapide*. For decades, this American-based model of food ways with its industrialization, standardization, homogenization⁵ has often been at the center of French ire for it symbolizes all that counters the French sense of culinary tradition. As such, it is the way in which multiple facets of French culture (economic, social and health), and in particular the way in which its *patrimoine culinaire* – represented in its collective cultural memory – has been shifting that concerns French people the most.

Cuisine and gastronomy have been a vital part of France's collective cultural memory. Over a period of centuries its national identity became fixed in this memory as well. What is a collective cultural memory? How is it shaped and displayed? How are memory and identity connected? A collective cultural memory is established through the evolving interactions and interpretations that a particular group has with socially contextualized knowledge and experiences. Three elements are necessary here: shared history, shared values, and a shared language.

Language plays an important role in the making of this cultural construct because as a socially mediated form of communication, language is a dialogic exchange, which is naturally tied to the socio-historical context of its users. Within that socio-historical context then, communication is the medium through which signs and social ideologies are determined.⁶ Yet common experiences and those socio-cultural values shaped resulting from that shared history are equally vital. After the Revolution in 1789, the many governments that followed searched for ways to unite a diverse and separated nation; such an undertaking often occurs through the adoption of nationalized systems like education, monetary units, or even language; the "frenchification"⁷ of France occurred at the expense of regional dialects and *patois*. But another national and social tie was invoked to unite the people: "Carême's" French cuisine became a key building block in the vast project of constructing a nation out of a divided country."⁸

Over the course of time, this collective cultural memory of culinary heritage became intertwined with national identity, as evidenced by scholarly and non-academic observations. Willging notes that since at least the late eighteenth century "France has been world-renowned" not only "for the fecundity of its land," but also for the "quality and variety of its cuisine."⁹ Fantasia dates France's deep cultural pride in its *patrimoine culinaire* to the publication of *Grimod de la Reynière's* first annual *Almanach des Gourmands* in 1803.¹⁰ Recent comments by the deputy mayor of Beaune, in Burgundy, as he co-hosted a dinner featuring foie gras, crispy pig ears and white Burgundy also attest to this collective cultural memory: "It's for our heritage. It's part of our French identity."¹¹

Sumara describes identity as emerging "from relationships, including relationships people have with books and other communicative technologies based on language."¹² The flourishing of gastronomic writing that occurred in nineteenth-century France greatly assisted "in this general cultural diffusion."¹³ Likewise, the existence of the folklore and mythology of foodstuffs – as in the case of Camembert cheese¹⁴ – in addition to those visual texts and symbols (advertising) that further promoted and inculcated the *patrimoine culinaire*¹⁵ produced a social and historical interaction between the French people and their culinary past that continues yet today. The nexus of such socio-historically grounded interactions, knowledge and language experiences have created a unique sense of national pride and identity for France.

The Americanization of one of France's most enduring aspects of national identity, its food, has been occurring since the liberation of WWII. The fear was that Americanization, with its consumer- and profit-oriented focus, would have a negative

impact on French traditions.¹⁶ In the 1950s, American foodstuffs such as chewing gum and Coca-Cola were moving into the French market. At the same time, legislation was being passed both in France and abroad that influenced the perception of an attack upon France's culinary heritage and national identity as understood through its collective cultural memory.¹⁷

American aid to France post WWII impinged on France's sense of itself as an independent world power.¹⁸ The Marshall Plan and the Blum-Byrnes agreement forced the French to "modernize" and to make certain cultural allowances, such as no longer limiting restrictions on the import of U.S. films. These concessions were of course resented; however, France like other western European countries needed the financial assistance in order to rebuild.¹⁹ France's need for U.S. monetary aid ended after 1954, yet the growing interest in and desire for American cultural products became a concern.²⁰ In partial response to these concerns, President de Gaulle established a powerful Ministry of Culture in 1959, which created cultural centers (*les Maisons de la Culture*) designed to promote French culture in France.²¹

Freeze and others discuss three things that culturally assaulted France's national identity post WWII: Coca-Cola, Cinema, and Euro Disney.²² Resistance was great on the part of France, yet futile. For example, after meeting with numerous obstacles and a French government embargo on its product in February 1950, the Coca-Cola Company used lawyers, scientists, the U.S. State Department and its journalist connections in order to break into the French market. By April 1950, the French government relented and lifted its ban on the product.²³ Similar struggles occurred when American Cinema and Euro Disney came to France: political, legal, economic, and social clashes persisted until French concessions were made.

As discussed, history and values are connected to the French collective cultural memory, and so is language because a common, socially produced means of communication is essential for uniting any group. For example, the *Académie Française* was founded in 1635 with a mission of standardizing the French language.²⁴ In 1994, the Toubon law was enacted, requiring all public communications (e.g., advertisements, government documents, product labels) to be strictly in French.²⁵ Such legislation demonstrates the perceived threat of "coca-colonization"²⁶ by the U.S., but from a linguistic perspective and it reveals "the principle that the state should intervene to preserve the French cultural heritage and to ensure ongoing cultural creation in French."²⁷

The most symbolic culinary offender is *la restauration rapide*. Although this foodway has existed in France since 1969, it is "identified abroad as a distinctively 'American' commodity."²⁸ The Americanized version, McDonald's, has come to embody the negative sentiments that the French associate with its model of production and consumption – standardization, homogenization and industrialization – all of which run counter to the French culinary sensibility and thus to its collective cultural identity. This perception seems to hold despite the fact that a Belgian version of *la restauration rapide*

(*Quick*) currently shares 23% of the market²⁹ and the fact that McDonald's France does what it can to distance itself from its parent company, McDonald's USA.³⁰

When José Bové and fellow farmers from the *Confédération Paysanne* dismantled a new McDonald's building under construction on August 12, 1999, this symbolized not only an aggressive statement against "Americanization," but also against the new enemies of "globalization" and "food safety." Bové recognized the central role of food in France and used it as a powerful rhetoric to argue against globalization, for which McDonald's became the symbol. "In a country with long-standing traditions of farmer's markets and three-hour meals, the pace and tastes of contemporary culture pose a very real threat to French identity."³¹ Bové became a French hero (a modern day mustachioed *Astérix*) who dared to stand up to the overpowering conglomerate McDonald's (representing the *Romans* in the ever popular French comic).³² This act of defiance added to the collective cultural memory of French foodstuffs and to the notion that French culinary identity is still worth preserving.

Thus, the cultural "assault" that French society feels stems from decades of forced cultural allowances, in addition to certain social and economic shifts.³³ How have the French resisted? What have they done thus far to reclaim and maintain their culinary heritage? Not surprisingly, their resistance efforts have been made with panache.

What specifically have the French done to resist a complete overtaking by American culture? First, McDonald's France has been creating its own (anti-) identity in order to separate itself from its parent company. Second, French chefs and restaurants have been busy (re-) appropriating the concept of *la restauration rapide* and its foodstuffs. Third, the French have been active in the promotion of the specificity and particularity of French *terroir* and *les produits de terroir* and the preservation of France's culinary identity.

La restauration rapide is very popular with many French consumers, and is growing at an incredible rate. A recent industry profile report, *Fast Food in France*, noted that the French fast food market generated total revenues of \$3.6 billion in 2008. The Quick Service Restaurants, like McDonald's, accounted for 54.8% of the market's overall value. The market is expected to slow down, yet this report still forecasted an annual growth rate of 2.7% for the period 2008-2013.³⁴ While *la restauration rapide* is seemingly being accepted within French society, criticisms of this foodway remain strong and have been the impetus for changes on the part of McDonald's France.

McDonald's France has taken several steps to forge an individually French identity. Initially, they changed the atmosphere of the restaurants themselves; gone were the fluorescent lights and plastic booths as the French outlets were upscaled.³⁵ Next, they "frenchified" their menu items to include beer, salads, and versions of traditional French items like the *croque monsieur*, called Croque McDo. Thirdly, after Bové's demonstration, health concerns grew not only over American attempts to force the French to accept hormone-treated beef but also due to a series of other food scares that occurred in Europe (including mad cow disease); food safety became an

advertising campaign necessity for McDonald's France, which included the occasional veiled criticism of American food choices by highlighting the French differences. One slogan stated, "Born in the United States. Made in France."³⁶ In 2001, McDonald's France launched a nation-wide ad campaign called "Une Touche de Région Dans Votre Hamburger,"³⁷ which clearly lay claim to France's collective cultural memory as a nation replete in regional culinary diversity and superiority. Willging describes such moves as McDonald's France acting "out the role of the rebellious and scornful offspring who forges an (anti-)identity for itself by rejecting that of its embattled ancestor."³⁸ The French are re-appropriating this producer-consumer model as a way of conquering the invader.

Another form of re-appropriation: master French chefs are reinterpreting *la restauration rapide*. Due to societal shifts in the work force and in general eating habits, and given the growing market of *la restauration rapide*, American-style lunches of sandwiches and salads are seen more often. One reason for this trend is that the meal time in France has shrunk: in 1975 the average French meal lasted 90 minutes, yet by 2008, it had decreased to 30 minutes.³⁹ This reinterpretation of fast food highlights the local, fresh ingredients prepared with classic French flair, in homage to the national identity. One American writer in Paris noted that although the upscale French version of a hamburger might cost up to \$40, it would be a culinary experience with "duck fillets, juniper berries, and a dash of red wine on a sesame bun" or "ground beef fillet topped with pan-seared *foie gras*, chanterelles, mayonnaise, and two tablespoons of olive oil."⁴⁰ Such reinterpretations denote a sign of shifting perspectives on this foodway while simultaneously reclaiming French culinary superiority in its interpretations.

France has long been active in recognizing and promoting the uniqueness of its foodstuffs and diverse geographical attributes. The *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* (AOC) was created in 1905 and is a label that guarantees qualities and the origin of primarily wines.⁴¹ Since 1990, the AOC scheme was extended "to the entire agricultural and food sector in an effort to further reinforce and cement the credibility of the concept."⁴² More recently, the notion of *terroir* and *produits de terroir* has been taking root as a mark of quality. *Produits de terroir* are defined as "local and traditional food products or produce with a unique and identifiable character based upon specific historical, cultural or technical components;" this definition includes "the accumulation and transmission of *savoir-faire*."⁴³ From this description, it is not only the uniqueness of France's soil that makes the product so special, but also the know-how entrenched in the local history and traditions of its people. This represents a strong reclaiming of France's culinary heritage.

A culinary inventory project began in 1980 in partial response to the perceived (American) threat to traditional values; it is still in progress today. This project "has contributed to a reinvention of the culinary arts within a national framework, that of French gastronomy with all the sensations and images that it entails."⁴⁴ As a result of the publication of twenty-two volumes dedicated to *produits de terroir* and to traditional regional recipes, France has qualified and substantiated its collective cultural memory of its culinary heritage. In 1993, a state sponsored campaign provided gastronomic

training for students and teachers alike.⁴⁵ The intent of the training was to counteract the homogenization that McDonald's brought upon French society. From this we see that just as a nineteenth century nationalized primary education helped to unite a budding French nation, so did twentieth century culinary education help to promote a national culinary identity based on *le patrimoine culinaire*.

Bérard and Marchenay note that the passing of certain regulatory protectionist measures dealing with regions and the origins of products and foodstuffs coincided with the establishment of a common European market and paradoxically began a movement in favor of the protection of the heritage of regional and specific products just as open trade channels were launching. In this way, "culinary heritage has become a political tool for the construction of identity in a context of europeanisation and globalisation."⁴⁶ Because the *produits de terroir* are perceived as healthier, safer, and traditional, these products are "attracting increased attention from producers and consumers alike."⁴⁷ This is especially important to note because Bové included globalization in the cultural discussion on foodstuffs and foodways, and *produits de terroir* represent one way to reclaim the French culinary culture, history and collective memory.

France's collective cultural memory and culinary identity have endured political, economic and social shifts over the past century. When a threat to its collective culinary memory and national identity has been perceived, the country has typically taken legislative and social steps to counter it. While it appears that *la restauration rapide* will not be completely eliminated from the current landscape of French foodways, it seems that a "frenchification" of this producer-consumer model has been a successful strategy for its acceptance. Additionally, the preservation and promotion of the diverse agricultural bounty and unique qualities that French foodstuffs possess has been another tactic that has once again given France a prime seat at the world culinary table. Consequently, through the acts of re-appropriation, reinvention, and when necessary even the formation of an (anti-)identity, France has managed to keep its culinary relevance and unique culinary heritage alive.

Notes:

¹ Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 36.

² Ibid., 36.

³ Ibid., 85.

⁴ Pierre Boisard, *Camembert: A National Myth*, Translated by Richard Miller (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

⁵ Richard Fantasia, "Fast Food in France" (*Theory and Society*, 24:201-243, 1995).

⁶ Marcia Moraes, *Bilingual Education: A Dialogue with the Bakhtin Circle* (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 1996).

⁷ Ibid., 7.

⁸ Ferguson, 82.

⁹ Jennifer Willging, "Of GMOs, McDomination and Foreign Fat: Contemporary Franco-American Food Fights" (*French Cultural Studies*, 19(2):203).

¹⁰ Fantasia, 202.

¹¹ Christina Passariello and David Gauthier-Villars, "France Offers a Menu for Its National Identity – Sarkozy Tries to Ride Efforts to Protect French Cuisine, but Polls Suggest Appetite for His Party Is Down in Sunday Vote," *Wall Street Journal*, 20 March 2010: Section World News p. A16.

¹² Dennis J. Sumara, *Why Reading Literature in School Still Matters: Imagination, Interpretation, Insight* (Mahwah, NJ: LEA Publishers, 2002).

¹³ Ferguson, 87.

¹⁴ Boisard. 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 90.

¹⁶ "Trade, Culture, and Identity." In *The French Challenge: Adapting to Globalization*, p. 41-64, 130-136. (The Brookings Institution Press, 2001), 43.

¹⁷ Willging, 200.

¹⁸ Rixa Ann Spencer Freeze, "French Food Vs. Fast Food: José Bové Takes on McDonald's." (Master's Thesis, Ohio University, 2002), 58-62.

¹⁹ "Trade, Culture, and Identity," 44.

²⁰ Freeze, 62; "Trade, Culture, and Identity," 44-46.

²¹ "Trade, Culture, and Identity," 45.

²² Freeze, ch.3.

²³ Ibid., 65.

²⁴ Ferguson, 37.

²⁵ Freeze, 75-76; "Trade, Culture, and Identity," 49.

²⁶ "Trade, Culture, and Identity," 44.

²⁷ Ibid., 45.

²⁸ Fantasia, 204.

²⁹ Willging, 207.

³⁰ Ibid., 208.

³¹ Freeze, 97.

³² Ibid., ch.4.

³³ Fantasia, 234. Here Fantasia notes that the economic model (e.g., part-time work) and a shift in eating and work habits have also contributed to social shifts; hamburgers alone are not to blame.

³⁴ Datamonitor. *Fast Food in France: Industry Profile*, August, 2009.

³⁵ Willging, 209.

³⁶ "Trade, Culture, and Identity," 57.

³⁷ Freeze, 129.

³⁸ Willging, 210.

³⁹ Susana Ferreira, “ ‘Restauration Rapide’ Nation – As France’s Frosty Attitude Toward Fast Food Thaws, Master Chefs Offer up Interpretations,” (*Wall Street Journal*, 21 November 2009, Food & Drink, p. W9).

⁴⁰ Joseph Harriss, “Burger’s Revenge.” (*The American Spectator*, December 2008/January 2009: 66-67).

⁴¹ Marion Demossier, “Culinary Heritage and Produits de Terroir in France: Food for Thought.” (In *Recollections of France: Memories, Identities and Heritage in Contemporary France*, ed. Sarah Blowen, Marion Demossier and Jeanine Picard. NY: Berghahn Books, 2000), 147.

⁴² Laurence Bérard and Philippe Marchenay. “A Market Culture: Produits de terroir or the Selling of Heritage.” (In *Recollections of France: Memories, Identities and Heritage in Contemporary France*, ed. Sarah Blowen, Marion Demossier and Jeanine Picard. NY: Berghahn Books, 2000), 154.

⁴³ Demossier, 146.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁵ Demossier, 146.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁴⁷ Bérard and Marchenay, 154.

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