



AgEcon SEARCH
RESEARCH IN AGRICULTURAL & APPLIED ECONOMICS

The World's Largest Open Access Agricultural & Applied Economics Digital Library

This document is discoverable and free to researchers across the globe due to the work of AgEcon Search.

Help ensure our sustainability.

Give to AgEcon Search

AgEcon Search

<http://ageconsearch.umn.edu>

aesearch@umn.edu

*Papers downloaded from **AgEcon Search** may be used for non-commercial purposes and personal study only. No other use, including posting to another Internet site, is permitted without permission from the copyright owner (not AgEcon Search), or as allowed under the provisions of Fair Use, U.S. Copyright Act, Title 17 U.S.C.*

Food Drink and Identity in Europe, *European Studies*, 22 (special edition), ed. Thomas M. Wilson, 2006.

According to the blurb for this special edition of *European Studies*, growing interest in consumption across the humanities and social sciences has resulted in particular attention being paid to the role of food and drink in the construction of local, regional and national identity. The volume 'provides the first multidisciplinary look at the contributions which food and alcohol make to contemporary European identities, including the part they play in processes of European integration and Europeanization. It provides theoretically informed ethnographic and historical case studies of transformation and continuity in social and cultural patterns in the production and consumption of European foods and drinks, in order to explore [their effect upon spatial identities]'.

To the extent that these objectives are met, it is in piecemeal fashion, for this is a collection where the whole is certainly no more than the sum of the parts. I assume the editor, Thomas Wilson, had rather little effective control over the commissioning of the papers and was unable to give much of a steer to the content of the component essays in the book. Wilson's introductory essay gives a sound, if brief, indication of how studies of food and drink might illuminate Europeanization. He helpfully distinguishes three foci of scholarship – food and drink as commodities, eating and drinking as practices, and food and drink as signifiers (of group culture and identity) (p. 12). Most of the ensuing volume is concerned with the third of these, the symbolic aspects of ingestion. Its relevance is positioned in the context of globalisation, postmodernist thought and the study of identity, upon which topic Wilson draws on the work of Stuart Hall, David Sutton and Mary Douglas (though, perhaps sadly, his contributors do not!). Wilson commends to us three guiding propositions. He advocates that attention be directed to social constructions of food and drink (though not all contributors agree). He asserts, on the strength of a dalliance with that most hackneyed of quotations from Brillat-Savarin (you know the one I mean!) that 'Food and drink are building blocks in the construction of all social identities.' (p.15) And he asserts that 'eating and drinking are much more than the ingestion of foodstuffs, they are part of temporal and spatial cultural patterns' (p. 16) – they bring order from chaos. So, the symbolic construction of food and drink produce identity and order. Wilson then proceeds to introduce the papers in the collection, sorting them into two themes, 'Europeanization', containing two essays, and 'Nationalizing, Localizing and Ingesting', which covers the remaining seven.

Erick Castellanos and Sara Bergstresser, in 'Food fights at the EU table: the gastronomic assertion of Italian distinctiveness', explore effectively the relationship between Italian identity and Europeanization. Italians have used a belief of the superiority of traditional foodways and particular local products to resist and contest tendencies towards European integration. Castellanos and Bergstresser argue that Italians exhibit weak national identity. Localism and cosmopolitanism are more normal points of identification. More the creation of emigrants than residents, Italian cuisine has nevertheless become one source of national identification, pasta being a binding symbol for a population for whom food matters. However, quality is guaranteed locally: 'one only trusts cuisine that has local roots and traditions', and 'cuisine remains within the sphere of the vernacular, born of the domestic'. (p.194) Consequently there is great suspicion of both industrialised food, though of course it is used widely especially by the young, and of Europeanization, because it represents

centralised regulation and an external threat. Food works against identification with Europe, but not as a result of direct juxtaposition with the national.

Stacia Zabusky makes the second contribution to understanding the role of the European. She reports on scientists working at the European Space Research and Technology Centre (ESTEC) of the European Space Agency (ESA) in the Netherlands. National identity was totally absent in the professional context of science and the laboratory. Only at leisure did signs of national belonging become evident and, Zabusky claims, only in situations where eating was involved (p. 219). Her evidence is drawn from observation in the late 1980s of their behaviour in the works canteen and at a Fun Run organised as part of the 25th anniversary celebrations of the ESA. Re-examining material collected in the late 1980s for another purpose, she shows that food operated as medium and expression of national identity. Partly by choice of whom to join as a dinner companion, and partly by food choices in the canteen, scientists at play affirmed the importance of being citizens of different European countries. She remarks (p. 222), *'the ESTEC norm was, in fact, for people to conform to the expectations of others – people's food choices largely fell into (stereo-)typical national categories: one French scientist always sat down with a hot entrée and a small bottle of red wine; the Dutch engineer always ate a sandwich with a glass of milk; the German scientist nearly always drank beer with his lunch.'* It was, uniquely in ESTEC, at the dinner table that national identifications appeared. We might reasonably expect that the situation now would be rather different, and that the Europeanization process, which was more precarious twenty years ago, to be more fully entrenched among professionals, who have adopted international, cosmopolitan, or perhaps European attachments.

The remainder of the essays are almost exclusively about aspects of the internally-oriented experience of individual countries. Of course, attention to national institutional variation is inherently valuable and in some instances very interesting. Cases remind us of the importance of institutional configurations and particularities – of licensing laws, the administrative arrangements in different states, the varied bases of diet in different countries. In general, however, in my view, they don't help greatly in understanding identity.

A notable exception is Wendy Leynse who, in an ethnographic essay called 'Journeys through "ingestible topography": socializing the "situated eater" in France', makes a particularly impressive contribution, revealing how the processes that create and reinforce local identity actually work. By describing in detail participation in everyday but also special events we can appreciate how children come to learn an attachment to local produce and cuisine in a context.

Based on examples of excursions for children and families – a school trip and food festivals – a naïve reporting of observations articulates how 'how people come to understand, internalize and identify with a place (or places)' (p. 131). The opening example is about a four-day field trip for 10-year-old school children living in a town in the Loire, in which they visit various historical monuments, landscapes and farms. A form of integrated pedagogy, which includes science, agriculture, ecology, geography and food, the children are taken to talk to farmers, to pick strawberries and to smell wild mint in the hedgerows. These activities they record in the log of the trip, reporting appreciatively on experiences of tasting. This combination of activities would be inconceivable in, for example, Britain, thus telling something about French understanding of both France and food, a condition possible because food already has a central place in national culture, thus offering many opportunities to reinforce the sense

that food matters. Products are attributed a spatially specific set of meanings in which both those of home and those of other regions in France, visited really or virtually, are contrasted to celebrate and derive meaning and pleasure from variation in produce and cuisine. The French think of France as a patchwork of local food areas, of which they want to have knowledge and experience, and they start with their own. It is the context of learning that is important.

Presented through very careful observation and description, followed by persuasive extraction of implicit meanings, Leynse brings processes of socialisation fully out into the open. Readers can see, and test, how it occurs. This paper is actually about identity; it describes connections between recognition, places, the placing of oneself, and how one learns the shared attributes required to be a member of an informal collectivity. Unlike many papers ostensibly about identity, this one does persuasively describe mechanisms and processes which constitute the loose but tangible sense of belonging; in this case a result of exposure to and identification with food products which are said to be, and treated as if they were, defining properties of a locale. It captures the sense in which identities are created, rather routinely, sometimes by virtue of networks of others wanting you to learn, but in an integrated way across a range of practices.

Other case study accounts are also insightful. A story of alcohol taxation, market regulation and prohibition in Northern Europe contrasts nicely with the experience of drinking in the South. Imbibing (a lot of) beer in those Oslo bars which broadcast foreign football matches indicates a shift in drinking norms and, it is suggested, thereby a change in the nature of national identity in Norway. Another essay describes the arrangement of drinking outings in the style of the Basque country among migrants to Catalonia where a different kind of performance is required. Basque custom involves the group paying visits to a series of venues in sequence, whereas the Catalan norm is to remain in one or two for the whole evening. Both essays teach us something about the social and bonding role of consumption.

The remaining essays include description of a rural community in the Gers, France, showing that judgements of quality in food in such a place is based on interpersonal trust. There are also three specifically historical essays, all covering long spans of time – concerning the symbolism of beef in Britain, the potato in Ireland, and nutritional modernisation in the Netherlands – which provide some useful information but contribute little of substance to a specific understanding of identity.

As regards analysis of identity and identification, the single country case study proves generally rather ineffective. Sadly there is no comparison of cases, and no attempt to build analytically upon differences. The reader is left to imagine the possible comparative lessons, something which is made very difficult because of the disparity between the topics under examination. In this regard, I came to question the value of a *multi*-disciplinary approach. *Inter*-disciplinarity I understand; however difficult it is to achieve, it has potential for fruitful controversy, for the building of integrative understandings across disciplines, productive friction and new insight. The rationale for collecting essays from (six) different disciplines, each ploughing its own furrow, while addressing different countries, topics and periods, escapes me.

In general, it is the ethnographic essays that deal most successfully with the topic of identity and identification, and they provide the highlights in this collection. Yet even they

sometimes fall foul of the tendency to offer superficial and repetitive generalisations about the universal functions and symbolic meanings of food and drink. Too many essays fail the 'so what?' test, except insofar as the detail of idiographic description of local particularities might interest the antiquarian, ethnological amateur, or food enthusiast. Though not untypical of studies of food and drink, the volume makes no apparent theoretical progress.

Food preferences and practices are expressive in various ways, which is to say that they are meaningful; but I haven't been convinced that the search for identity (in any of its possible forms) is the major basis for holding or exercising those preferences. That understanding identity remains a progressive research programme for food studies, and should be preferred to pursuing issues of, say, consumption, distribution, health or sociability, requires demonstration and justification. And should it pass the test, it is arguably only when representation, reception, interaction and practice are examined simultaneously in specific social contexts that we can begin to isolate and describe the processes which contribute to identity formation and to distinguish them from those with other functions. This is what Leynse achieves, in my view.

Probably what matters most in relation to identity is when and where, and with whom, a particular type of identity is called upon. The most fruitful essays in the collection suggest that it is context which is crucial – that national identity occurs among professionals when eating rather than working; that regional attachment grows, is exhibited and reinforced in local trips and public cooking; that local identity flourishes in reaction to an ineffective and inefficient state. Weak symbolic associations between foodstuff and a category of person, particularly when they are established from textual sources, probably give little clue as to how to determine or explain actions or preoccupations. It is only when there is a stronger marker of affiliation, one which probably entails some emotional involvement and commitment among situated groups, that identities matter.

Overall, this volume is disappointing in its lack of theoretical and conceptual vision and ambition. There is little analytic rigour behind the discussion of identity. There are some neat exemplars of how things work – mostly illustrating the value of ethnographic methods – but there is very little new generalisation across cases and contexts arising from the case studies. Analytic power can be generated both from the comparison of cases and abstraction concerning the properties of contexts, whereupon preconditions for the salience of particular types of meaning (or identities) may be isolated. However, these seem out of reach for this collection.

Alan WARDE
University of Manchester