

Introduction: Food and power in the Middle East and Mediterranean

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In May 2011, a deadly outbreak of *E. coli* infection scared Germany. Within a few days, the infection spread to other European countries, inciting further panic. The German authorities were quick to point to the culprits: Spanish cucumbers, they argued, were the source of the epidemic. Immediately officials in Germany banished imports of specific Spanish vegetables (tomatoes, cucumbers, lettuce), while other European nations followed suit. Many German customers, however, avoided all Spanish produce (and even eschewed Spanish restaurants). Spanish farmers were suddenly facing a huge and unexpected crisis.

By late May, however, German authorities admitted that they “had got it wrong” in pointing to Spanish cucumbers as the source of the deadly infection. German Agriculture Secretary Robert Kloos declared, “Germany recognizes that Spanish cucumbers are not the cause [of the *E. coli* infection].” Within a few days, other potential sources of infection were identified: bean sprouts from an organic farm in Lower Saxony and a potato-themed restaurant in Lubek, both in former East Germany. Yet, by the time of this writing (early June), the German authorities had admitted that these locations were not the source of infection either and acknowledged that it was still unclear why and where the contagion emerged.

As relations between Germany and Spain became strained, and as Spain demanded hundreds of millions of euros in compensation, Russia, which first banned the import of Spanish and German produce, went on to prohibit all EU produce. EU authorities, who had not objected to the ban on Spanish produce, were now vociferous in their protest, arguing that Russia’s response was “disproportionate” and a transgression of WTO rules and spirit.

This incident, though taking place in Northern Europe, is closely related to many of the topics discussed in this special issue of *Hagar*, dedicated to “Food and power in the Middle East and Mediterranean.” First and foremost, it highlights the strong yet often overlooked links between food and international relations. Second, it sketches a culinary geography of power, in which an affluent north-west European nation may accuse a Mediterranean EU member of being the source of contamination related to low hygiene standards, and the accusation, though baseless and admittedly wrong, is so convincing that many North Europeans avoid not only the specific vegetables originally believed to be contaminated, but all the produce

from this Mediterranean nation. In this respect, Michael Herzfeld's (1985) claim that the Greeks are considered Europe's aboriginals may be extended to Spain, where the dwellers of this geographically, politically and culturally marginal EU member are deemed likely to maintain unsatisfactory hygiene standards.

This dynamic culinary geography of power also explains why locations in former East Germany were next on the list of immediate suspects: the civilized Germans are less likely to evade hygiene standards than the Mediterranean Spaniards; however, if indeed, Germans were involved in such a transgression, it probably has to do with their socialist past, a period in which they lost some of their civilized qualities.

Russia's banning of all EU produce, however, challenges this power structure: an East European nation, and for that matter, a post-socialist one, maintains that low hygiene standards are possible in Western Europe. It is of little wonder, then, that EU authorities were so loud in their protest against the Russian decision. It wasn't merely the expected financial damage or the transgression of WTO rules and spirit, but also the idea that an ex-Soviet East European nation could blame West Europeans for being unhygienic that was so disturbing. Russian Premier Putin's reaction to these complaints—"We cannot poison our people for the sake of some spirit..."—only shows that he was well aware of the challenge to the power structure embedded in Russia's ban.

The analysis of the ways in which power works within the culinary sphere in specific geopolitical contexts is the main theoretical project undertaken by the contributors to this special issue. Let us therefore turn to a brief discussion of the theoretical approaches that aim to decipher the interface of food and power.

Food and power

Food is a prominent means of power. While access to, and control over, large amounts of nutritious and expensive fare are blunt manifestations of prestige, supremacy and potency (Bourdieu, 1984; Mintz and Du Bois, 2002; Sahlins, 1963, 1976), regulating the food intake of others, or preventing them from eating altogether, is the utmost form of coercion (Counihan, 1998; Douglas, 1966; Richards, 2004). Lappe and Collins (1986) thus argue that hunger is the absolute sign of powerlessness.

Food is also a means of cooperation, mutual assistance and partnership (Wilk, 1999). In instances where food is distributed or donated, power is enacted "not through force and the ability to deny, but through giving, through the obligations created by giving and through the influence wielded in the act of giving" (Counihan, 1999:46). Food sharing (commensality) is therefore highly regulated across societies and cultures and is routinely embedded in complex sets of rules and rituals (Counihan, 1999:48).

Foodways may also negotiate, subvert and challenge existing power structures, undermine power arrangements and depict alternatives (Avieli, 2009; Belasco, 2007; Cwiertka, 2007; Klumbytè, 2010; O'Connor, 2008; Watson, 1997; Watson and Caldwell, 2005). Clark argues that "eating is a cauldron for the domination of states, races, genders, and ideologies and the practice through which these discourses are often resisted" (2004:19), while Belasco coins the term "countercuisine" (2007) so as to emphasize modes of culinary defiance.

While these links between food and power are well acknowledged, their sources and dynamics are hardly understood or agreed upon. Until recently, the culinary sphere was perceived as trivial and unworthy of serious scholarly attention (Belasco, 2002, 2007; Mintz and Du Bois, 2002). Foodways were, in the main, presented as reflections of existing power structures: passive mirror-images of actual power relations (Douglas, 1966, 1975, 1984; Evans-Pritchard, 1982; Levi-Strauss, 1966, 1970, 1973, 1987; Richards, 1937, 1939; Sahlin, 1963, 1976; Tambiah, 1969).

Since the mid-1990s, as the research of food and society has developed, scholars have paid increasing attention to the generative powers of the culinary sphere and acknowledged culinary systems and practices as arenas and processes that produce power (Bourdieu, 1984; Goody, 1982; Mennell, 1985, 1989; Mintz, 1985) and where differing discourses of power compete for hegemony (Caplan, 1997; Counihan, 1999, 2004; Ohnuki-Tierney, 1993, 1995; Sutton, 2001; Watson, 1997; Wilson, 2006). In recent years food and power have conjoined in a new anthropology, sociology and history of food that focuses mainly on three salient issues: food safety, food globalization and the culinary politics of identity (Belasco and Scranton, 2002; Lien and Nerlich, 2004; Watson and Caldwell, 2005). The power dimensions of the culinary construction of identity are central to the articles presented in this issue.

Identity

Projects that deal with the culinary politics of identity (Caldwell, 2002, 2005; Klumbytè, 2010; Narayan, 1995; O'Connor, 2008; Pilcher, 1998) essentially develop French gastronome Brillat Savarin's famous aphorism, "Tell me what you eat and I shall tell you who you are," into a set of elaborate and sensitive insights regarding contrasting and, at times, competing facets of national, regional, ethnic or gender identities that are conveyed by different food items, dishes and modes of eating. An intriguing distinction exists between studies that deal with the identity embedded in the "exotic" foods of marginal peoples, in post-socialist foodways and in Western culinary arrangements. When it comes to marginal peoples, anthropology's traditional subjects, attention is mainly paid to the ways in which specific dishes and eating modes represent competing facets of national or ethnic identity (Abbott, 2008; Ashkenazi and Jacob, 2000; Avieli, 2005a, 2005b; Cusack,

2000; Cwiertka, 2007; Howell, 2003; Narayan, 1995; Pilcher, 1998; Rosenberger, 2007). In the post-socialist context, the subject at hand is often the modernization of production of specific food items (Dunn, 2004; Klumbyte, 2010; Mincyte, 2008; Ries, 2009). In contrast, when studying Western culture, one emphasis is governmental and institutional debates over brand rights of specific lucrative food items in specific (mainly, EU) regions (Blue, 2008; Castellanos and Bergstresser, 2006; Cavanaugh, 2007; DeSoucey, 2010; Hinrichs, 2003; Leitch, 2003; Winter, 2003). These distinctions are possibly the outcome of prevailing academic power structures, based on imagined dichotomies, such as tradition vs. modernity, private vs. public or rationalism vs. emotionalism.

Power

Most of the research on the interface of food and power adopts the Foucauldian stance explicitly or implicitly, at least as a theoretical departure point. “[P]ower,” argues Foucault (1980:89), “is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered but rather exercised, and only exists in action.” Power is not a thing or control over things, but rather a network of non-egalitarian, dynamic, multidirectional relations (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983:183).

The definition of power as a multidirectional set of relations is both a critique and an expansion of Gramsci’s approach to hegemony. Gramsci (2004) conceived of power not as sheer force applied through institutional violence (or in Gramsci’s terms, the power of political society), but as a condition/trait/gift of specific social echelons, who utilize it so as to maintain their privileged status through control of the media, the education systems, the economy and other non-violent institutions (or in Gramsci’s terms, the power of civil society). While Foucault too was interested in non-violent social institutions, he understood power as a quality of the system and advocated that power is not a limited resource available only to specific social actors or groups, but omnipresent and multidirectional.

Foucault also highlighted the generative capacity of power: as opposed to the Weberian perception of power as violent and destructive, Foucault (1989) argued that power relations produce knowledge, which in turn reshapes the relations of power in a dynamic loop that produces new knowledge, which in turn reproduces new power relations. Power is also generative in that it always entails “resistance,” i.e., another set of relations and practices that work their way up, or a form of power that emerges as a consequence of power (Scott, 1985).

Food and power in Israel

Five out of the six contributions in this issue deal with Israel. The Israeli culinary sphere is extremely varied, vibrant and dynamic, the outcome of high-speed, high-intensity processes of modernization and migration.¹ As power and power relations are so central in Israel, the scarce anthropological and sociological scholarship on Israeli foodways inevitably refers to power and power relations. Both Kalka's (1991) analysis of middle-class "coffee events" and Shapira and Navon's (1991) essay on a Tel Aviv café describe subtle negotiations of power between hosts and guests, which surround the food and beverages in the first case and the social relations and spatial arrangements in the second. Sered's (1995) insightful article deals with the ways in which elderly Mizrahi women in Jerusalem amass social and religious status by feeding their relatives, to the extent that they are believed to influence divine decisions and even "coerce" God into treating their relatives favorably.

More recent scholarship addresses various aspects of power within the Israeli culinary sphere more explicitly. Ram (2004) discusses McDonald's as a form of American culinary imperialism and points to the ways in which it is resisted and manipulated in Israeli McDonald's venues. He also suggests that falafel, Israel's "national dish," is a contested artifact, a means of Israeli colonization and a hub of Palestinian resistance (see also Raviv, 2003). Efrat Ben Ze'ev (2004) describes the way food helps displaced Palestinian refugees in their attempt to construct and preserve memories of Palestine. This act of "eating and remembering" appears to be an act of protest against Israeli colonization and the Jewish-Israeli rendering of the landscape. Tene (2005) and Rozin (2005), in their contribution to Kleinberg's (2005) pioneering project on the emergence of Israeli cuisine, write on gender and cooking in historical perspective and show how the nascent Israeli society and state imposed, through official and private institutions, culinary arrangements and preferences that represented a specific social order, apparently Western, modern and scientific, but actually Ashkenazi (Jews of East European origins) and dismissive of the cultures of immigrants from Muslim countries. Gvion (2005), in the same volume, describes the recent expansion of Israeli culinary horizons and the inclusion of both Mizrahi cuisine² and that of other cultures as a consequence of the multidirectional challenging of the hegemonic Ashkenazi culture.

Gvion's (2006) book on the culinary practices of Palestinian women living in Israel celebrates resistance. Her ethnography shows how these women (and their family members) perceive their cooking, based on gathering, shopping for scraps, "expanding" restricted budgets and "augmenting" staple starches with minimal amounts of meat and a lot of work, as a strategy for negotiating, subverting and even achieving tiny victories over the Israeli state and the Jewish majority. Stein's (2008) analysis of Jewish-Israeli visits to Palestinian-Israeli culinary destinations and consumption of their foods exposes the tense relationship and repressed feelings hiding beneath tables laden with hummus, falafel balls and fresh pita bread.

Each of the above studies sheds light on a specific segment of the Israeli culinary powerscape. Our hope is that the current issue will expand these studies by addressing explicitly the operation of power within the Israeli culinary sphere and by exposing the ways in which specific cooking modes, dishes and eating arrangements partake in the negotiation of differing facets of varied social aspects in Israel.

The scope of the special issue

In the first article, Julia Bernstein examines consumption of non-kosher food, particularly pork, by Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants in Israel as a marker of identity and as an imagined status marker. The long struggle of Russian-speaking Jewish immigrants for position and significance in Israeli society is reflected in their fight to gain recognition of pork consumption as a legitimate practice of the Jewish national collective. In this way, a specific food item—pork—turns into a powerful key symbol. Bernstein's ethnography, analysis and discussion widens our understanding of the symbolic power of food and its important role in migration processes: for the immigrants themselves, food is used not only as a creator of a "sense of home," but also as an ax to grind within the social structure of the receiving society and for the benefit of their freedom of self-definition.

Zeynep Sertbulut explores major milestones in the formation of the culinary narrative in Israel. Drawing on an analysis of diverse cookbooks, food articles, songs, literature and posters targeting a non-Israeli audience, Sertbulut demonstrates how meanings of food may be shifted subject to different national interests and historical moments. Her article illustrates the ways food is used as a tool for what Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger termed *The Invention of Tradition* (1983)—in this case, the invention of Jewish and Israeli national identity. Thus, Sertbulut illuminates the notion of cookbooks (and other culinary texts) as cultural objects which contain "more information and messages from their authors than only instructions of how a certain dish is prepared" (Fragner, 2000:63). Culinary texts targeting an outside audience appear to be not only providers of food and eating descriptions in a given place, but also methods used to introduce a nation to the outer world. Food might operate as a powerful "non-human ambassador," which asserts collective imaginations, symbolic values, dreams, expectations and interests.

While Sertbulut focuses on the symbolic power of food in the establishment of a unified national identity, Inbal Cicurel investigates how weak and marginal ethnic groups use food as a way of strengthening their position in the national social order. Cicurel focuses on a unique group: Karaite-Jewish women living in a moshav (agricultural settlement) in Israel's periphery. Her subjects are marginalized substantially and phenomenologically as quasi-Jews, as women, as Mizrahi, as farmers (or ex-farmers) and as dwellers in the geographical and economic periphery. These women face a complex situation in which non-Karaite ("Rabbinical") neighbors question their Jewishness, and as a consequence, their belonging to the

Israeli nation. For that reason, Karaite women use the narratives of food and taste as a means of molding an ethno-gendered identity. Karaite women present their domestic skills—namely cooking and feeding—as manifestations of their Jewishness and as a testimony to their authenticity and religious superiority over Rabbinical women. Cicurel's unique contribution is in the illustration of how food preparation might be a direct and explicit action of power accumulation.

However, food might be used to strengthen social status not only by members of ethnic groups, immigrants, those of a specific gender, nationality or class, but also by individuals in their daily life. Freek Janssens describes the use of food on the micro-political level. His article provides an in-depth account of the shifting power relations in the slaughter of a steer among a modernizing shepherd family in Sardinia. Janssens' main theoretical contribution lies in proposing the new concept of "instant status." In a richly detailed article that focuses on a single culinary scene—namely, the slaughtering of a steer—he defines a novel analytical tool for understanding an unexpected and temporal rise in social hierarchy. The concept of instant status articulates the ways people change their social status and acquire, albeit for a short time, a higher status. Furthermore, moments of instant status—which, as Janssens emphasizes, happen all the time but very often go unnoticed—are discernible in the context of food preparation because of the characteristics of food as a domain that is deeply personal yet profoundly public. Preparing food might be a powerful counter-practice against micro-social hierarchies. However, just like food itself, social statuses may be enjoyed to the full, but are quickly consumed, digested and discarded.

While Janssens focuses on the ways food is used to accumulate power within a family unit, Nir Avieli describes how changing values and power struggles affect the ways families and individuals eat. By exploring the transformation of the Israeli kibbutz's dining room, Avieli challenges the common understating of the "kibbutz crisis" as a consequence of the rise of individualism in contemporary Israel and argues that primordial social institutions, such as the family and the ethnic group, rather than the individual, are the main competitors for social hegemony in contemporary kibbutzim. In other words, according to Avieli, power struggles within and beyond the kibbutz, which might be related to the capitalization and post-modernization of Israeli society, paradoxically reinforce modern socioeconomic allegiances and not post-modern individualism.

In contrast, Rafi Groszlik points to the centralism of global socioeconomic conditions in the rise of individualism among Jewish-Israeli elites. Individualism appears to be essential in the way Israeli westernized elites achieve a new identity that raises the banner of openness to otherness, worldwide social justice and global ethical awareness (namely, cosmopolitanism). In the current Israeli cultural context, these ethical concepts provide merely a "symbolic cover" for focusing on the self as a project of consumption, health and identity. This characterization of the Israeli cosmopolitan is manifested in what has become an Israeli culinary icon: hummus. Recent global influences shift hummus towards "organic hummus." This dish can be

perceived as embedded in principles of sustainability, localism or traditionalism, but equally this is an entrepreneurial attempt by producers to develop consumer taste for a niche product. By playing on discourses of local/traditional, the meaning of hummus shifts, and individuals who eat the “new” hummus can feel at once cosmopolitan (for keeping up with organic trends) and responsible (for eating a more sustainable food product), but what is most important to them is the concern for health and taste and their unwillingness to be gullible (“not to be a *freier*”).

Finally, in the segment called “Open Spaces” we present two interesting personal thoughts about food and power. The first piece is a “personal case study” provided by one of the best known Israeli culinary-cultural agents: publisher and cookbook writer, Ruth Sirkis. Sirkis’s piece provides a unique self-interpretation regarding her lifetime project of culinary change in Israel. Sirkis analyzes her own life story and compares it to two other prominent female actors on the Western culinary scene: American cookbook writer and television celebrity, Julia Child, and cookbook writer and gastronome, Claudia Roden. Sirkis describes their achievements, as well as her own, as “reaching far beyond the kitchen.” She shows how domestic cooking skills, motivation for culinary investigation and writing about food influenced the book industry, the food industry, restaurants, and the choice of foods in supermarkets and homes, as well as cultural openness.

The second piece, by journalist and culture critic Oren Amit, provides an interesting, sharp and funny description from the eyes of a gourmet restaurant consumer. Visiting a new, post-modern and upscale restaurant in Tel Aviv made him think about food as art. Amit’s article provides insights about the differences and similarities between cooking and the work of art.

This special issue thus brings together the writing of different scholars who offer a variety of perspectives on the critical analysis facing food and power, as well as promising directions for future research for those working within the field of food and society. The articles included in this issue were first presented at the International Conference on “Food, power and meaning in the Middle East and Mediterranean,” held at Ben Gurion University, Israel, in June 2010. We wish to thank Prof. Uri Ram and Prof. Yoram Meital for their enormous contribution to the conference as members of the organizing committee, for their help with this special issue and for contributing their knowledge and experience in support of our work. We feel that this is a worthy way to support the work of junior colleagues.

NOTES

¹ Israeli society is often referred to as a pressure cooker (*sir lahatz*).

² *Mizrahi* (“Eastern”) is a term invented in modern Israel for Jews of North African, Middle Eastern and Balkan origins.

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