

The Power of Myth: Marketing First and Second Stage Baby Foods by Association with a ‘Mediterranean’ Myth

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A veces unos pájaros, un caballo, han salvado las ruinas de un anfiteatro.

Jorge Luis Borges, *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1940)

In Borges’ doubly imagined world of *Tlön*, ideas can become corporeal in the physical world, only to whither away when they cease to be perceived, are forgotten, or are abandoned. The ultimate instance of this phenomenon on *Tlön* is described above: ‘Sometimes, a few birds, a horse perhaps, have saved the ruins of an amphitheatre’. This extreme form of Berkeleyan subjective idealism — which stated simply that objects only exist in the minds of the perceiver and thus cannot exist without being perceived — has a reciprocal in our own world in the power of myth and its formative effects on our perception of reality. This paper will explore the power of ‘Mediterranean’, itself a collective myth, to corrupt our view, inform an illusory world, and, in this specific case, be employed to sell baby food.

Piccolo

Piccolo organic baby foods was established in London by Catherine Gazzoli in April 2016 with substantial backing from Mark Angela, former Chief Executive of Pizza Express; Andrew Baker, former Chief Executive of Duchy Originals; TV food celebrity, Prue Leith; Craig Sams, co-founder of Green & Black’s; and Jan Woods, of Lion Capital, and formerly of PepsiCo. The company had also gained early supply contracts with Waitrose and Asda supermarket chains.

In an article in *The Telegraph Business* section on October 2016, Piccolo is described as:

[...] based in London, and which makes fruit and vegetable purées based on the principles of the so-called Mediterranean diet, involving high consumption of olive oil, legumes, fruits and vegetables and low consumption of meat, has grown exponentially since its launch in April. [...] Piccolo ingredients are sourced from across the Mediterranean, while its meat and dairy products come primarily from the UK (*Telegraph*).

As we shall see, though featured in a trustworthy broadsheet business section, and possibly a casualty of inappropriate press release editing, the statements on a high level of olive oil in baby food, and the sourcing of ingredients are both inaccurate and symptomatic of what has become a broader imprecision throughout Piccolo’s own online materials, both text-based, still image, and video.

In the same *Telegraph* article, Gazzoli is reported saying:

Piccolo is a passion project that I started two years ago from my kitchen table. As a new mother I felt the UK baby food market was quite commercialised, and I was surprised by how dominant the large corporate players were. We want to own our niche in first foods (*Telegraph*).

And, shunning Gazzoli’s founding aversion to what she saw as a quite commercialised baby food market, but noting the peripety of her accruing hugely commercially successful financial backers with experience in global and multinational industries, the article and Gazzoli celebrate the financial and developmental success of Piccolo’s first months. In fact, the company would reportedly go on to exceed predicted turnover fivefold in its first six months (*BBC* 23/01/17).

Piccolo has continued to grow, and having introduced its products to the Republic of Ireland and China in 2017, the company will be entering the US market in 2018. If Gazzoli’s unlikely, at best, optimistic and naïve kitchen table intention was actually to carve out a non-commercialised homely niche in baby food, she has failed dramatically, though possibly she is pecuniarily very happy with that failure. Moreover with Piccolo’s London base, and Shanghai and Seattle nearly 17,000km apart, there will be some serious food kilometres involved. Such distances will enhance the exoticism of Piccolo’s claimed Mediterraneanness, but at the same time prejudicing ingredient sourcing and processing, and having a significantly deleterious environmental effect.

A theoretical context

There has been extensive work undertaken in France, Italy, and North America since the 1950s in what may loosely be called cultural theories of reality. In his 1957 ground-breaking book, *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes explored how a selection of 53 contemporary cultural phenomena embodied myth, and how that myth informed an understanding of the phenomena themselves. Subjects ranged from Garbo’s face to wrestling, from Einstein’s brain to the (then) new Citroën DS. Steak, he writes,

[...] is at the heart of a cut of meat, mythologically it is meat in a pure state, and whoever eats it assimilates a taurine strength. [...] Full-bloodedness is steak’s *raison d’être*; the degrees to which it is cooked are expressed [...] in images of blood (*saignant, bleu, à point*).

Steak is, in France, a basic element, nationalised more than socialised; it figures in every setting of alimentary life: flat, yellow-edged, somewhat shoe-leathery in cheap restaurants; thick, juicy in specialised bistros; cubical, the core moistened throughout beneath a charred papery crust in haute cuisine establishments; it participates in all rhythms, comfortable bourgeois meals and bohemian bachelor snacks; it is a food dense and expeditious, creates the best possible rapport between economy and efficacy, as well as both the mythology and plasticity of its consumption (Barthes, pp.83-84).

In the extended essay, *Myth Today*, Barthes described the underlying semiology of myth as a secondary sign system, and how this can describe the process by which myth works. In conclusion, he states that myth is not arbitrary, but that it is deliberately formed to create certain conditions in society.

Myth tends toward proverbs. Bourgeois ideology invests in this figure interests which are bound to its very essence: universalism, the refusal of any explanation, an unalterable hierarchy of the world. The foundation of bourgeois statement of fact is common sense — that is, truth when it stops on the arbitrary order of him who speaks it (Barthes, pp.269-270).

Advancing this concept of mediated social control during the 1980s, Jean Baudrillard, and Umberto Eco, inter alia, developed ideas concerning the manners in which text, image, and physical structures can not only mask reality, but in some cases create a false or hyper reality. Both cited Disneyland:

The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false: it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary. It's meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the 'real' world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere, particularly among those adults who go there to act the child in order to foster illusions of their real childishness (Baudrillard, p.13).

When, in the space of twenty-four hours, you go (as I did deliberately) from the [authentic] fake New Orleans of Disneyland to the real one, and from the wild river of Adventureland to a trip on the Mississippi, where the captain of the paddle-wheel steamer says it is possible to see alligators on the banks of the river, and you don't see any, you risk feeling homesick for Disneyland, where the wild animals don't have to be coaxed. Disneyland tells us that technology can give us more reality than nature can (Eco, p.44).

Baudrillard weaves another way of looking at what he describes as 'models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal' (Baudrillard, p.1):

Thus perhaps at stake has always been the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real; murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the real. All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange - God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference (Baudrillard, pp.5-6).

[...] When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity. There is an escalation of the true, of the lived experience; a resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. And there is a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential, above and parallel to the panic of material production. This is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us: a strategy of the real, neo-real and hyperreal, whose universal double is a strategy of deterrence (Baudrillard, pp.6-7).

Perhaps the most prevalent and immediate example of hyper reality in Western societies today is the television soap opera, which to many is more real than so-called reality TV. People who regularly subscribe to *Eastenders* or *Coronation Street*, inter alia, those who watch these programmes without fail over an extended period of time, may begin to believe in some way that the heightened dramas of the stories' characters, their interpersonal relationships and contextual events that, along with the calendar, are synchronised with real events outside the soap, actually happen in real life, that each episode is an authentic account of life in a special milieu. Furthermore, assiduous viewers' responses to the soap's ongoing developing relationships and events within the soap may unwittingly inform their views of their own world outside the confines of the soap — the fictional informing the real. Indeed, this informing the real world was a deliberate and causative strategy in the creation of the world's longest running radio soap, *The Archers*. It was originally billed as

'an everyday story of country folk'. Starting in 1950, the programme was conceived as a palatable and subliminal means of disseminating guidance on increasing food production in post-war rationing Britain, snippets of this guidance for farmers and smallholders were slipped into the conversations of a hyperreal farming community in the English Midlands.

Place and non-place

Another, more lateral approach to these ideas was proposed by French anthropologist, Marc Augé who describes place, or rather anthropological place, as a place with identity, relationships, and history:

These places have at least three characteristics in common. They want to be — people want them to be — places of identity, of relations and of history. The layout of the house, the rules of residence, the zoning of the village, placement of altars, configuration of public open spaces, land distribution, correspond for every individual to a system of possibilities, prescriptions and interdicts whose content is both spatial and social. (Augé, pp.52-53)

The appellation, *place*, 'at least refers to an event (which has taken place), a myth (said to have taken place), or a history (high places)' (Augé, p.82).

In his discussion of non-places, spaces of transience and anonymity such as airports, supermarkets, and hotel rooms, Augé notes that, 'there are words that make image — or rather, images: the imagination of a person who has never been to Tahiti or Marrakesh takes flight the moment these names are read or heard'. (Augé, p.95) This phenomenon is not restricted to place names; words such as holiday, sea, sun, cruise, beach, can operate in a similar manner in certain contexts. Reciprocally, he also notes that less exotic words can have the opposite effect (America, Europe, and West), and that:

[...] certain places exist only through the words that evoke them, and in this sense they are non-places, or rather imaginary places: banal utopias, clichés. [...] Here the word does not create a gap between everyday functionality and lost myth: it creates the image, produces the myth, and at the same stroke, makes it work (Augé, p.95).

In this sense, 'Mediterranean' can be seen to elicit such an imaginary place of myth — 'mountains behind and the sea in front, all bathed in shimmering sunshine — that is the Mediterranean for us', writes Ansel Keys (Teicholz, p.177) We each have our own keyword responses to the trigger. But this is also a place whose existence is largely unquestioned — 'Mediterranean' is used so frequently that in most instances one doesn't really consider the need to think about what it is nor where it is. Similarly, 'Mediterranean' as an intended locator (Mediterranean

region), or when assigned as either adjective or noun (Mediterranean lifestyle, Mediterranean roots), can be seen to reference such an imaginary place of myth, equally without question. This is in contrast to the Mediterranean Sea, whose boundaries and constituent seas are precisely defined (IHO, pp.15-18).

'Mediterranean' can also be generally assigned to non-locative entities and phenomena. The Mediterranean Climate, for example, which was originally based on mean climatic conditions of some parts of the Mediterranean littoral and hinterland, and characterised by mild wet winters and dry, warm or hot summers, is also present in areas of north and south America, Africa, Asia, and Australia (Climate, 8). It is not specific to the Mediterranean littoral and hinterlands — it does not possess an *appellation d'origine contrôlée*. Whereas the Mediterranean region is, by any definition or set of characteristics, an area described by imprecisely defined and transitory boundaries (see Oldways description below, listing locations of alleged variations of the Traditional Mediterranean Diet archetype).

Another way of looking at this would be to consider the land-landscape interface. The moment one sees an area of land and considers it deliberately or subliminally as a landscape, one ceases to see what is actually there, rather one experiences a view of what is there in terms of a landscape, qualified by a range of influencers ranging from personal experience and prejudice, to visual culture, social and mass-media. On leaving such a location, the landscape ceases to exist, consigned merely to the vicissitudes of memory, while the actual topography and ecology of the space that preceded the landscape remain unaffected by their being perceived. Consider economic or political landscapes which both make no pretence of substantiality, and whose volatile substrates include transitory data and topical hyperbole.

Myth in increasingly secular societies

In his book, *Winning the Story Wars*, Jonah Sachs echoes Baudrillard's description of the Disneyland imaginary being neither true nor false:

Myths are neither true nor untrue, because they exist in a separate space and time. They need not conform to the literal constraints of reality. In fact, most societies have set the scene for their myths in a separate reality altogether — either long ago, or far away (Sachs, p.59).

He argues that the last hundred years have seen huge changes in the way that we live, and that for many the socially adhesive myths embodied in mainstream religions have not survived these changes, realising what Sachs describes as *The Myth Gap*. He then proposes contentiously that this gap is being filled by products that have been enhanced by imagined stories; an enduring, if unfashionable example of

this marketing tool would be Marlboro Man. It is now a common feature of products to have a back-story involving the true, the suggested and/or the imaginary. Piccolo's back story starts with a homely kitchen table and developing family history, but then jumps to a sun-drenched idyll.

Winning the Story Wars is essentially a marketing manual published by the Harvard Business Review, but it points lucidly to another aspect of myth that pervades capitalist societies in the products we are encouraged to need and persuaded of their attendant lifestyle advantages. Without any hint of irony or mythmaking, Sachs' evangelism is clear: 'Though some may instinctively wish to return to a media landscape ruled by shamans, bards, or priests, that's not likely to happen any time soon. That marketers are some of our most powerful mythmakers, is, for now, a basic fact of life' (Sachs, p.76).

Piccolo's promise of Mediterranean Goodness

'A lifetime of Mediterranean Goodness for your little piccolo' (Piccolo 1) greets the visitor to the warm colours of Piccolo's homepage, and this develops into a 'Mediterranean' theme that continues throughout the site with 29 references to 'Mediterranean' in diverse forms:

- The Mediterranean (3)
- Mediterranean approach (7)
- Mediterranean diet (4)
- Mediterranean Diet Pyramid (1)
- The traditional Mediterranean diet (2)
- Mediterranean Goodness/goodness (9)
- Mediterranean lifestyle (1)
- Mediterranean roots (1)
- Mediterranean region (1)

Piccolo's description of Mediterranean Goodness here has nothing to do with its baby food. But what are 'Mediterranean Goodness' and 'Mediterranean lifestyle', what does 'Mediterranean' mean, indeed, where is the 'Mediterranean', and even, is there a 'Mediterranean'? These may seem like bizarre questions, but asking them leads one into an understanding of the Piccolo strategy, and delves into the heart of one of the most important media and food phenomena of the late C20th and early C21st, the so-called Mediterranean Diet, itself a core, if understated element of Piccolo's stance.

The Mediterranean Diet has its ideological genesis in flawed research undertaken by a team led by American physiologist and father of the Diet, Ancel Keys, in remote villages on Crete in the late 1950s and early 1960s, in which unusual longevity in a group of working communities was attributed to a diet seemingly heavy in olive oil (Teicholz, pp.38-42). At that time olive oil was not a common ingredient outside its areas of production, or in those diasporic communities that had carried the oil with them. The unfamiliarity of this novelty would later become a godsend for its evangelists.

After a long period of gestation and tactical development work in Greece and Italy in the 1980s (Teicholz, pp.175-184), the Diet was reified and quickly rose to fame in the USA with the creation and launch of the Mediterranean Diet Pyramid in 1993, constructed by an alliance of the advocacy organisation Oldways, based in Boston, Massachusetts; the nearby Harvard Medical School; and the World Health Organisation (Oldways 25). This graphically displayed the Diet's original commandments in a triangle, nevertheless dubbed a pyramid - itself emblematic of a country bordering the Mediterranean Sea and steeped in millennia of history. Oldways' preliminary dietetic concept of the 'Traditional Mediterranean Diet' consisted of (in decreasing order of consumption): 'breads and grains, including pasta, rice, couscous, polenta, bulgur; fruits and vegetables; beans, legumes and nuts; cheese, yoghurt and other dairy produce; olive oil and olives; fish; poultry and eggs; sweets, and lean red meat (Oldways).

Oldways stated that this diet was based on 'the dietary traditions of Crete [Keys], circa 1960, structured in the light of 1993 [American] nutrition research' (Oldways). But it also claims that variations of the Cretan archetype have traditionally existed in:

[...] other parts of Greece, parts of the Balkan region, parts of Italy, Spain and Portugal, Southern France, North Africa (especially Morocco and Tunisia), Turkey, as well as other parts of the Middle East (especially Lebanon and Syria). The geography of the diet is closely tied to the traditional areas of olive cultivation in the Mediterranean region (Oldways).

The Diet subsequently became a cultural phenomenon in affluent Western societies world-wide after saturation promotion led and managed by Oldways, aided by substantial financial backing by the International Olive Oil Council (Teicholz, pp.193-197). Through this hegemony the Mediterranean Diet essentially became an American possession, a cultural appropriation colonising mythic 'Mediterranean' lands.

Twenty-five years on it remains prominent today, albeit in modified form; and for the first time it is 'celebrated as the #1 overall diet' according to a 2018 American survey (US News). Oldways has since created other so-called traditional diets — the Asian Diet (1995), the Latin American Diet (1996), the African Heritage Diet (1997), and the Vegetarian and Vegan Diet (1997) — each with their own prescriptive pyramid and commandments (Oldways diet). However, Oldways' dietary empire has balked at conquering the homelands of the 'American Diet'.

Piccolo opens its case on its website with more 'Mediterranean goodness':

At Piccolo we're all about Mediterranean Goodness: bright sunshine, colourful markets, families eating around the table.

We believe that introducing a pinch of Mediterranean goodness helps develop your little piccolo's taste buds from when it matters most.

The Mediterranean approach to nutrition and lifestyle is one which champions good, honest and natural food which has been lovingly prepared, enjoyed with as many people as you can squeeze round your table (Piccolo2).

Put simply, echoing 'A lifetime of Mediterranean Goodness for your little piccolo,' the message is: here is an idyllic good life of sunshine and markets which is all about lovingly prepared, good, honest, natural foods, and happy families. We add a pinch of this idyll to y/our baby food, which s/he will eat, thereby assimilating and incorporating 'Mediterranean' goodness and lifestyle into their developing minds and bodies for lifelong benefit.

This good, honest food and happy families idyll appeared much earlier in 1993 (Jenkins 1994, p.xii), and was repeated verbatim in 2009 (Jenkins 2009, pp.2-3), when Nancy Harmon Jenkins, a co-founder, advisor, and director of Oldways, looked down on a valley from the prominent hill-top house she owns and visits in southern Tuscany. She considers a family of farmers who have lived for generations in the valley below, and the food that they eat twice daily, much of it grown and harvested on the farm:

[...] bread baked in the outside oven, pasta with fresh vegetables from the gardens, chickens and rabbits from the farmyard and pork from the pig that is slaughtered every Christmastime, mushrooms and chestnuts from the forest, and above all olive oil and wine that [the family] still proudly make themselves. They eat, in fact, an almost perfect Mediterranean diet, although they'd be perplexed to hear that — very low in saturated fats, very high in complex carbohydrates, lots of fresh vegetables, especially those cancer-blocking brassicas and cruciferous vegetables — cabbages, kale, turnip greens, broccoli, and so on (Jenkins 1994, p.xii).

Taking a broader view, she considers (with an unfortunate turn of phrase):

[...] this place in the world, almost dead-centre in the Italian peninsula, which puts it almost dead-centre in the whole northern Mediterranean region*, has been a place to think about food and its importance to communities and individuals, about what we grow and how we process it, how we prepare it and preserve it and share it among ourselves. [This valley] has been an example for me of what the Mediterranean diet means, in real terms and to real people (Jenkins).¹

This eulogising text can be seen as simple bourgeois nostalgia, a foreign gaze from an elevated and sanitising

distance by an author who can come and go whenever she wishes. The Mediterranean Diet means nothing to the observed family, as Jenkins herself says, they would be perplexed at the idea. The family are rooted to their land, it is their home, and they cannot come and go as they please. They eat what they can eat when it's available - their diet is unique to their history, their finances, their land, their culture and religion. But this cannot be replicated elsewhere. It is not the Mediterranean Diet. This is appropriated, mythic 'Mediterranean'.

Catherine Gazzoli crosses the Alps

Piccolo is proud of its hands-on and personal approach to sourcing ingredients:

The Mediterranean region is full of incredible, high quality ingredients, and Cat and the team have travelled across the Alps, from the apple orchards in Campania, Italy, [not their source for apples] to picking harvesting zucchini [sic] in Provenance [sic], France, meeting the families and friends involved in the growing of the ingredients that end up in Piccolo's recipes (Piccolo 3).

With what often seems like magical sleights of hand and misdirections, or in this case carelessness whose longevity suggests incompetence (provenance remained unchanged for more than six months); the Piccolo website provides rich pickings for critical analysis. Catherine 'Cat' Gazzoli did cross the Alps, but we are not told whether this was undertaken on mule or horseback, with or without allusive elephants, or by more conventional twenty-first century means of transport. Insouciance aside, crossing the Alps may be a more erudite reference than simply remembering the military exploits of Hannibal or Napoleon. In 1953, having left a freezing, post-war Cambridge (England) winter behind, and having driven through snowstorms in Switzerland, Father of the Diet, Ancel Keys, crossed the Alps by car and arrived in Domodossola, where: 'the air was mild, the flowers were gay, the birds were singing, and we basked at the outdoor table drinking our first espresso coffee. We felt warm all over'. Continuing to look back in 1975 in his book, *Eat Well and Stay Well the Mediterranean Way*, and with hindsight of his interpretations of his dietary research in Greece and Italy, he describes his delight with the food on this first encounter with Italy — the *Mediterranean Way*; 'homemade minestrone', pasta 'served with tomato sauce and a sprinkle of cheese', fresh bread straight from the oven, and 'great quantities of fresh vegetables', and always fresh fruit for dessert (Teicholz, p.177).

The hyper reality of Mediterranean

The Piccolo website is not burgeoning with images of 'bright sunshine, colourful markets, and families eating

around the table' (Piccolo 4) nor any form of imagery evocative of a 'wine-dark sea'. Its colour scheme is predominantly orange, yellow, and yellow-green — summer colours, but with the exception of a stock image of a yellow Fiat Topolino parked against a fading yellow-orange wall, and a few postage stamp images in the ingredients library (Piccolo 5), it is almost entirely devoid of suggestive imagery of Mediterraneanness. Exterior images feature groups of women and babies around a picnic table in a park, fields of cows, and a very green orchard, all of which evoke England. It is the words themselves that trigger the 'Mediterranean' myth:

The temperate isles of the Mediterranean are home to sun, sea and delicious dishes thought to hold the key to good health. But what is it that makes a Mediterranean diet quite so good for us?

It can be easy to focus on one particular dietary component in looking at healthy or unhealthy foods, but the traditional Mediterranean diet isn't about one particular food group or set of superfoods. Rather, it is all about balance, variety and moderation. It is with this approach in mind that we develop our recipes (Piccolo 4).

The allure of 'bright sunshine' is relative — consider the differing responses of, say, a holiday-maker on a Menorca beach, a Syrian migrant family seeking shelter from the midday sun in an overcrowded tented refugee camp on Lesbos — a 'temperate isle', a billionaire relaxing on the sun-deck of their yacht anchored off the Provençal coast, or a low-paid Moroccan immigrant worker in Almería's 42,000 hectare sea of plastic (Almería).

However, Piccolo assumes a certain level of affluence and appreciation of bright sunshine (and by inference, an indifference to greenhouse working conditions and refugee camps), fostering a sofa reminiscence or expectation of such temperate isles of sun, sea, and delicious food, triggering Augé's imaginary space, and pushing us face to face with a hyperreal. Piccolo leaves us hovering there while we hear about the Mediterranean (reinforcement) diet, followed by the traditional (it has a history) Mediterranean (reinforcement) diet; and we carry this further into Piccolo's own kitchen (where they personally develop recipes by hand). Whence we are led via (familiar) pizza, pasta, pita and hummus, paella and seafood to the Mediterranean (reinforcement) Diet Pyramid (structure/ Egypt), to the dietary traditions (history) of Crete (temperate isle), with the inevitable association of that Cretan diet with longevity. We then encounter the Piccolo philosophy of Mediterranean (reinforcement) Goodness (goodness), the Mediterranean lifestyle (family, friends, community), and finally, 'we believe that the way you eat (in this case, still thinking 'Mediterranean') is just as important for your health as what is on your plate' (Piccolo 4).

There is no mention of Piccolo products throughout this passage — this text is all about creating that imaginary world, a hyperreal 'Mediterranean' that will colour our view henceforth.

'Mediterranean', in the form of 'Mediterranean' lifestyle, roots, and diet, is a descriptor for a location that does not physically exist. Where is the 'Mediterranean' in Mediterranean lifestyle — is it in Monaco, Sirte, Tel Aviv, Lampedusa, Marbella, or Gaza? Is it all of these locations or none of these locations, is it in all of the locations bordering the Mediterranean Sea or none of them? If one was born in Mitilini, say, one could claim that one had Mitilini roots, but what would that same person mean if they said that they had Mediterranean roots — where is this Mediterranean? These seven locations are all coastal — so is the Sea the mother lode of Mediterranean roots? And would this bar inland locations from generating Mediterranean roots? Gazzoli's family 'has strong Mediterranean roots' but she was born in Geneva and educated in New York and California (Piccolo 7).

A thought experiment: you are standing with your feet in the Mediterranean Sea. You move away from the beach heading inland, when are you not in the 'Mediterranean'?

Would a paraphrase of Augustine on Time be appropriate — 'what then is 'Mediterranean'? If no one asks me I know what it is. If I wish to explain it to s/he who asks, I know not'. And at first it would seem difficult to avoid circular reasoning when explaining or understanding 'Mediterranean' as it is difficult to avoid referencing 'Mediterranean' itself in the process of its explaining or understanding what it may be.

In many contexts 'Mediterranean' can be seen to be referencing a general, highly non-specific setting or group of settings that may seem to possess some of the essential properties described in Augé's description of anthropological place: those of identity, of relations and of history (colourful markets). But this is not a physical place as such. In situ it can be the personal microcosm of a perceiver at a particular time, and the qualified perception of the space around them; or the memory of such a setting; or an imagination of such a setting. In the first case it is a tangible illusion, a type of auto-simulation created consciously or subliminally by a perceiver; an augmentation of perception with 'Mediterrania'; an incipient simulacrum replete with 'Mediterranean' ingredients. In the case of a memory or an imagination it takes on the form of Augé's banal utopia. In all cases the setting is located fast against the borders of placelessness — mythic. *La vie en méditerranéen*.

Piccolo ingredients

Piccolo states that it sources its ingredients from across the Mediterranean: 'Piccolo ingredients are sourced from across the Mediterranean, while its meat and dairy products come primarily from the UK'. (Telegraph) 'Piccolo ingredients are planted and nurtured in independent family farms from

across the Mediterranean from countries like Spain and Italy, with a few of our more tropical fruits and spices sourced from far flung corners of the world’. (Provenance) And: ‘Piccolo is sourcing from the Mediterranean [...] the tomatoes coming from Italy, [...] sourcing from Provence [...]’ (BBC23/01/17).

Sourcing from farms with palpable links to a credible ‘Mediterranean’ is crucially important to the Piccolo story as ‘Mediterranean goodness’ must involve ‘Mediterranean’ food, the more widespread its sourcing across the ‘Mediterranean’ the better.

More accurately, ingredients are sourced from three littoral Mediterranean countries — Spain, France, and Italy — not from across all 21 littoral Mediterranean countries. All listed meat products are sourced in France; while 89% of dairy products are sourced in England. Tropical fruits — mangoes and bananas — are sourced in Ecuador. No tomatoes are sourced in Italy (Bregazzi 1).

The ingredients library gives sourcing details for 29 out of a total of 68 ingredients (Bregazzi 1). These 29 ingredients collectively account for 72.66% by volume of 22 products (Bregazzi 2).

54.43% of all ingredients is fruit-based (of which only 0.05% is olive oil); 34.28% vegetables; 5.23% dairy produce; 3.75% grain, nut and seed; 1.36% meat; 0.45% fish; 0.32% unspecified; 0.18% fungi (Bregazzi 1).

Overall, 10.45% of ingredients are wholly sourced in littoral Mediterranean countries; 44% in littoral Mediterranean and other countries; 45.55% of ingredients are sourced from non-littoral Mediterranean countries (Bregazzi 1).

At Piccolo, independent family farms are at the heart of our sourcing decisions. We know our farmers and their stories, and have been lucky to have sourcing ethics very much part of our founder’s and her family’s background in food. It is an integral part of our Piccolo journey. We work closely with our farmers so that they grow for Piccolo bursting with flavour type produce to put in our recipes (Piccolo3).

Andalusia, and in particular its western province, Almería, are Piccolo’s sources for red peppers. The ingredient library states, ‘Almost 40% of Almería is thought to be covered in pepper plants [sic]. The mostly unspoilt Iberian coastline [of Andalusia] has the perfect temperature for growing these delicious colourful plants’ (Piccolo 6).

Andalusia in general is also a source for blueberries, olive oil, and raspberries. Almería is notorious for over 42,000 hectares of plastic greenhouses, the often appalling living and working conditions of its migrant workers who themselves have been described as modern-day slaves (Guardian), and the catastrophic effect this intensive hydroponic agriculture has on communities and the environment (Almería). This is the exact opposite of an unspoilt littoral and hinterland suggested by Piccolo. And although most of this greenhouse

agriculture is still owned by small family businesses, it does not support Piccolo’s picture of happy families around the kitchen table. This is far from ‘Mediterranean goodness’. Red peppers only comprise 1.18% of all ingredients, while Andalusia generates 11.59% of ingredients (Bregazzi 1).

And given the increased volume of ingredients required since its entry into Ireland, China and USA, and given its sourcing in Almería, it remains to be seen if Piccolo can maintain its stance on ethical sourcing from independent family farms, or even sourcing in its conception of the ‘Mediterranean’.

Conclusion

Myth or otherwise, ‘Mediterranean’ is the intended essence of Piccolo’s baby food, it is its *sine qua non*. But myth it is. Piccolo’s ‘Mediterranean goodness’ is instructional, proverbial in Barthes’ sense of refusing any explanation. ‘Mediterranean’ gives us a hyper reality, protecting us from Eco’s unseen alligators. And ‘Mediterranean’ is a potent cliché, an Augé banal utopia — it is all the good things that we want it to be, assuming that we ‘get it’ (and we have an appropriate level of affluence and appreciation of bright sunshine, and, *inter alia*, an indifference to greenhouse working conditions and refugee camps).

With a background in UK Slow Food and her original kitchen table passion for non-commercial, good, honest and natural food which has been lovingly prepared, it seems ironic that Gazzoli should be at the helm of a growing international fast food for babies business.

About the author

Adrian Bregazzi lives in south Cornwall, England. He is an independent scholar with interests in a range of culinary subjects including late C14th English working class food, ‘future foods’, food and imagination, food mythology, and the semiotics of food. He has presented at culinary symposia in Oxford (2013,14,18), Dublin (2014,16,18), and Melbourne (2016). Travelling for work in international education for over twenty years, he has experienced food cultures in northern Europe, South Africa, North and South America, India, Asia Pacific, and Australia.

Notes

1. This is incorrect. The valley is 20%, 770km, closer to the western end of the Mediterranean Sea than to its eastern end.

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