

Culinary Change, Disruption, and Death: Do Traditional Cuisines Have a Future?

Anthony F. Buccini & Amy Dahlstrom

ABSTRACT: In recognition of a worldwide wave of extinction of minority languages and dialects, linguists are intensely engaged with the issue of language death. A related process of ‘cuisine death’ is also underway, likely on a similar scale to what is happening with languages. It is therefore striking that there is little discussion in food studies of cuisine death. In this paper, we discuss why the field, despite its awareness in a general way of the loss of specific foods and foodways, has failed to recognise the wholesale demise of traditional culinary systems. We situate this discussion within a typology of cuisines based upon differently structured networks of culinary discourse and argue against a view that all cuisines are hybrids. Only through recognition of the existence of deep grammatical structure in cuisine can one appreciate the nature of culinary death. Finally, we call upon the field to develop an effort to document as fully as possible endangered cuisines.

In this age of globalisation and cultural homogenisation, food scholars are well aware of the process of loss of traditional foodstuffs and foodways, a development which affects cultural communities of all types, from those in poor, non-industrialised nations to ones in the so-called ‘Weird’ societies (i.e. ‘Western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic’). Despite this general awareness of and even engagement with issues involving the widespread loss of culinary traditions around the world, it is striking that there is little, if any, discussion in food studies of ‘cuisine death’, a term that we suggest we employ as analogue to the term current in linguistics, ‘language death’, used to refer to the stage in a given language’s history when its last native-speaker passes away; such a death brings about, at least in principle, the final and absolute silencing of that language and the end to what had been a cultural institution passed along continuously from generation to generation since – more often than not – some time remote in an obscure pre-history well beyond our scientific ken.

In this paper, we argue that the issue of ‘cuisine death’ is very real and that its neglect in food studies is due to the dominance – both in the academic field and in popular discussions of culinary culture – of writers who consider their object of study from a non-traditional point of view. More specifically, we believe that food discourse, especially in the Anglophone world but also to a degree elsewhere in the aforementioned ‘Weird societies’, is done primarily from the perspective of those who participate in and identify with an *exocuisine* and additionally operate within

a postmodern conceptual framework. As a consequence, participants in an *exocuisine* commonly fail to recognise the system underlying *endocuisines*; moreover, adopting a postmodern outlook predisposes one to see culinary change in terms of a simplistic model of ‘hybridity’ and further, in line with the general postmodernist rejection of the authoritative, to miss the central significance of the communal voice in traditional culture. Comparisons between cuisine and language are highly apt and instructive.

Culinary Systematicity and Endocuisines

Beyond its physiological underpinnings, human alimentation is clearly cultural in nature: it involves a complex of learned behaviours that regulates taste and texture preferences, food selection, the scheduling and composition of meals, methods of preparation and preservation of foodstuffs, the division of food-related labour, etc. This complex of alimentary behaviour is connected to other (quasi-)discrete or delineable domains of culture, including language, religion, medicine, law, etc., with some variation in the extent and depth of some of these connexions from one cultural community to the other. Alongside all these aspects, we must also bear in mind how intensely interwoven food-related behaviour is to all manner of social interactions, albeit again with considerable cross-cultural variation. We must further call attention to the fact that, as with language and other cultural domains, such complex alimentary behaviour is known to all human societies, however great the differences in detail may be between them. Despite the unfortunate colloquial associations of ‘cuisine’ with the alimentation of elite social groups, it seems simplest to employ this word, properly stripped of its elite associations, as the name of the food-related cultural domain and if we do so, it then follows that every society, or perhaps more narrowly and accurately, *every cultural community has a cuisine*.

Another fundamental point which needs to be stressed here is that cuisine, again in the same way as other cultural domains, has both a surface manifestation, those items and acts which can be observed with the senses, and an underlying mental representation, the complex of ideas, attitudes and rules relating to food, that allows individuals to perform acts and produce items related to alimentation and, no less importantly, to derive meaning from or decode the culinary acts and items that they perceive with their senses. This split corresponds directly to the distinction first made for language by Ferdinand de Saussure between *parole*, the perceptible utterance, on the one hand, and on

the other, *langue*, the underlying linguistic system residing in the minds of the speakers of a given language.

In language, the surface manifestation can take different forms – speech, sign language, written language, braille, etc. – and offers its own complexities and difficulties which we need not go into here. The surface manifestations of cuisine obviously offer a very different set of complexities and difficulties in that they engage a broader set of senses: taste, texture and smell, and sound and visual aspects as well. In natural language acquisition, a person, be it a child or someone at an older age, may well receive some greater or lesser amount of overt instruction regarding how the language works, but traditionally – for the vast majority of people throughout history – the language learner accomplishes his/her task primarily through observation, unconscious analysis and deduction. Even if the transmission of culinary knowledge, especially with regard to the active processes of cooking, food preservation, foraging, etc., involves a higher degree of instruction, explicit or tacit, it is surely also the case that a vast amount of the crucial information involved in the transmission of culinary knowledge is done simply through passive experience followed by the learner's unconscious analysis and deduction. But throughout the process of basic acquisition and well beyond, this analysis and deduction must proceed slowly, depending on the observation of countless manifestations of culinary acts and items, just as is the case with language and generally also with other cultural domains. For linguists, the knowledge and judgement of native speakers is afforded a special authoritative status for the very good reason that mastery of the grammatical and semantic complexities of a given language is relatively rarely achieved by anyone who has not been immersed in that language from early childhood. If, as we believe, the complexities of a given cuisine are roughly on an order similar to that of a given language, it follows that acquisition of deep knowledge and authoritative judgement in things culinary should demand roughly similar intimate and prolonged engagement with a cuisine.

The question of transmission/acquisition of culinary knowledge lies at the heart of the distinction mentioned above between endocuisines and exocuisines. Buccini (2016, pp.119ff.) proposes a typology of culinary cultures that is based on the nature of discourse regarding food in a given cultural community (these two terms are 'exapted' from their more restricted original use by Lévi-Strauss). More specifically, we make a distinction between different kinds of what we will call here *networks of culinary discourse*. Accordingly, an endocuisine is one in which the culinary discourse network is to a high degree contained within the cultural community, in which transmission and acquisition of culinary knowledge occurs primarily within the family but is then reinforced through discourse also with extended family, allied families (e.g. through *comparaggio* or god-parenting), and other members of the neighbourhood or parish or village: endocuisines are

transmitted, analysed, celebrated, and cooked largely within circles of people who know one another and have little or no recourse to culinary knowledge from outside the subregion or region. This is not to say that these are hermetically sealed systems: they are not, as there are always contacts within such a community with other regions through merchants, through seasonal travel for labour, through contacts with locally based members of elite society who take part in superregional culinary cultures, etc. Archetypal endocuisines have perhaps been the culinary cultures of rural societies and one can easily appreciate that especially among the broader, poorer and more numerous portion of such societies, alimentation would rely almost exclusively on agricultural and foraged products of the local environment or nearby environments (through exchange between, for example, communities on plains and those in nearby mountains). Yet, endocuisines can and do exist and long have existed in urban settings – in this regard, one thinks of places like Naples, which despite being a large port city has maintained a very slow-changing, conservative popular food culture for many centuries. The basis of such culinary conservatism is the nature of the network of culinary discourse, no less than it is reliance on the local environment for its food products.

One last point that must be made emphatically here is that an endocuisine is by nature not just proximately focussed with regard to its culinary discourse but it is very much a community institution that is intensely valued as such and typically is with great regularity celebrated through events that transcend the individual family but remain essentially within the community. In such an environment, the individual's culinary preferences are not necessarily negated but rather become secondary to a communally developed and negotiated consensus: the core and most details of alimentary behaviour are a shared body of in-group culture, no less than the local dialect.

Exocuisines

In contrast, an exocuisine's network of culinary discourse extends in significant ways outside the proximate culinary community. To be sure, the initial culinary acculturation of most children even here takes place in the family, allowing for the transmission/acquisition of a number of fundamental ideas about and attitudes toward food, such as basic taste preferences, notions of what is disgusting, the canonical outlines of meal times and meal structures, etc. If we take as an illustrative example of an exocuisine the mainstream culinary culture of the contemporary United States, we can see how stark the difference can be between an endocuisine as described above and an extreme exocuisine, for the contrast in culinary discourse, though not particularly considered in the literature on food, not only goes hand in hand with a number of well-described features of American foodways but, in our opinion, underpins them. Among these features, one thinks

immediately of the high consumption in the US not just of highly processed foodstuffs but of whole prepared dishes and even meals, dating back well into the twentieth century and perhaps most strikingly embodied in the frozen 'tv-dinner'. Americans have also long had a relatively high rate of eating meals outside the home but in recent years a sort of mixed manner of eating has exploded in popularity with the rise of food-delivery services, namely, eating restaurant food but doing so at home. While this rise of delivery services has given consumers increased access to prepared meals of higher quality, fast-food chains have also entered the home-delivery model, alongside the older take-out model, helping keep the fast-food market share in the US at its very high level. The results of these developments have surely been a marked decrease in the percentage of meals consumed in the country for which one must shop for ingredients and then prepare and cook and serve the food; in place of the family menu involving conversations about and planning for and execution of culinary acts, the discussion is boiled down to one of the choice of food type and the specific restaurant from which the meal will be ordered.

Home cookery has by no means disappeared from the world of the American cultural mainstream and in recent decades has received in some social circles a significant boost with the blossoming of a new-found interest in all things culinary. This increase in interest in cooking has been building for several decades now and has been paired with and stands in a complex relationship to a parallel increase in the production and availability of a wide array of media materials: a) increased publication of cookbooks as well as popular books on food in general and specific cuisines; b) the rise of television programming on food, starting slowly with cooking shows on PBS and then giving rise to the Food Network and now on to food-related programming on all the major networks; c) the development of a host of online material, from chat sites and individual blogs and video channels devoted to food and cookery; d) the growth of informally and formally food-focussed tourism. Indeed, the advent of food studies as a legitimate academic field and the tremendous upsurge in food studies across many traditional academic disciplines must also be seen as part of this general cultural phenomenon in the US (with close parallel developments throughout the Weirid societies and beyond). A great portion of this material is intended as instruction for the home cook and the rest serves more generally to inform the individual reader's or viewer's culinary knowledge and ability to appreciate culinary cultures from around the world. The consumption of all these texts and shows and videos constitutes a major part of what we are calling a network of culinary discourse.

It is quite striking how successful this mass of food-related media products has been in an already crowded marketplace of established television and film genres, music, sports, etc. And it is of course true that not all

elements of mainstream American society have taken up culinary educational and entertainment material in the same way or to the same degree, though the reach of both of these is wide and deep. In this regard, we must not overlook the very high degree to which this burgeoning branch of public culture has been commercialised both directly, e.g. for individual authors, chefs, restaurateurs, etc., and indirectly, for corporate sponsors of food products, tourist destination boards, etc. The large-scale presence of food-related marketing in the US pre-dates by at least a century the upswing in broad interest in cuisine (which itself is now several decades old) and thus advertising, first in print and then in electronic media, has long constituted a key element in mainstream America's network of culinary discourse and indisputably played a major rôle in the shaping of the nation's mainstream cuisine. What once was largely limited to a competition between producers of raw and prepared foods for the consumer's money along fairly basic parameters (price, quality, cachet) has evolved to a vastly more complex mercantile battle royal that builds on those basic parameters and includes claims ranging from exoticism and 'ethnic authenticity' to indulgence in caloric decadence and homey American 'comfort foods' to real and unreal health benefits.

The US has been at the vanguard in the development of the modern, strongly commercialised kind of exocuisine, though parallel (and partly related) developments are found elsewhere. As to why America took up this leading position, the causes are complex and lie beyond the scope of this short paper but we must briefly mention some of the more obvious and important factors: a) the mobility of Americans, commonly but not exclusively in response to economic pressures, across a very large nation has loosened the bonds of the extended family; b) the structure of work and attitudes to it, along with an early increase of women working outside the home, are widely seen as having impacted the time spent together within the nuclear family; c) the reception of multiple significant waves of immigrants into the nation greatly expanded the range of cuisines represented and given the combination of the need for workers to eat many meals outside the home and the fact that entrepreneurial opportunities for many immigrant groups (Italians, Chinese, Mexicans, etc.) were initially limited to the food industries, so-called 'ethnic cuisines' have exercised influence relatively quickly and broadly on mainstream eating habits; d) gradually increasing religious and ethnic plurality within residential districts has vastly limited cultural consensus and the organisation of communal institutions along traditional cultural lines. And alongside these and other socioeconomic and cultural factors, Americans have developed and accepted a level of commercialisation of all things that has long made marketing propaganda pervasive in their lives, no less in the food sector than elsewhere.

As defined with respect to its network of culinary discourse, mainstream America presents us with the

quintessential exocuisine. At all levels of society, Americans are – and have long been – bombarded with food advertisements that represent a significant portion of their culinary discourse. As various demographic and socioeconomic pressures have led to a loosening of the bonds both within the family and within the proximate community and the transgenerational transmission and infra-communal reinforcement of culinary culture has weakened or disappeared, the gap has been filled by recourse to engagement with public discourse on food, a development that started in earnest in the 1970s or 1980s and increases day by day as we speak.

What then are the effects of this radical change in culinary discourse on the structure of cuisine when compared with the structure of a traditional endocuisine? The changes are both predictable and verifiable. Insofar as familial discourse is reduced, transmission/acquisition of a fundamental system will be reduced, streamlined to very basic ideas, attitudes and rules. Insofar as both familial and proximate communal discourse is reduced, cuisine will function less, or at least very differently, as a marker of group identity. A reduction in the structures that regulate food choices not just generally but in relation to traditional weekly and seasonal calendars will open up greater freedom of choice which, as informed by both commercial and educational public culinary discourse in a multicultural and globalised society, will encourage an increasingly wide-ranging, even promiscuous, incorporation of foods of disparate origins into a given individual's or family's diet. From a structural standpoint, there is a strong shift of alimentary regulation by the deep-structural grammar of a traditional cuisine to alimentary regulation according to individual tastes and preferences and extra-culinary interests which are played out on the individual's knowledge of surface manifestations of any and all cuisines available to him or her. There is a strong shift away from the communal and in-group function of cuisine to cuisine serving increasingly as a means of expression of individuality, a movement which introduces an aspect of competition to alimentary behaviour and encourages the prizing of novelty, features that barely exist in traditional culinary cultures; this process touches other cultural domains in modern society and often is attributed to the rise of capitalism.

We have discussed here relatively extreme cases of endocuisines and exocuisines but being tied to the social construction of their networks of culinary discourse, cuisines clearly can vary widely along a continuum, with many historical and current cuisines falling in the middle stretch between the traditional rural and the (post)modern American mainstream. Space restrictions force us to set aside a detailed discussion but it should be noted that, long before capitalism, cuisines of the elites of Europe and elsewhere, extending back to ancient times, have exhibited signs of having more open networks of culinary discourse: the Roman elite comes to mind, with its keen interest in

Greek culinary culture, with its equivalent of professional chefs imported from abroad, and its endless appetite for new preparations and novel and costly ingredients from around the known world. Bourgeois cultural communities have often been more intermediate between the extremes and between them and rural peasant communities, urban lower classes have had cuisines more open to non-proximate discourse and influences than their rustic counterparts.

Systematicity and Change

In current food writing, one commonly encounters the claim that all cuisines are hybrids. This claim appears frequently in discussions of culinary 'appropriation' and the topically related notion of 'authenticity', where the invocation of universal hybridity is offered as a counter to spurious claims about the existence of culinary 'purity'; the reasoning seems to be that since all cuisines are hybrids with admixtures from many other cuisines, invocations of culinary appropriation run counter to normal, universal development. With remarkable frequency, the illustrative evidence offered for universal hybridity is to call attention to the central place that chillies play in the cuisines of India and parts of China and especially to the alleged revolutionary impact that New World plants and above all the tomato had on Italian cuisine.

In the US at least, the common notion that culture generally and cuisine specifically are in a constant state of change and flux is surely conditioned by Americans' perception of their own surroundings. But the projection of the current American cultural model onto all other cultures and, more dangerous still, backward onto all cultures in the past is grossly chauvinistic and anachronistic. While it is true that the elite exocuisines of the past were open to the adoption not just of new ingredients but to varying degrees also of composed dishes and whole styles of dishes, in the case of traditional endocuisines, of the humbler, locally-bound foodways of the poorer bulk of the population, the acceptance of culinary innovations was limited almost exclusively to ingredients, primarily to new plants and animals that could be produced locally and which fit well into existing slots in their culinary system alongside established analogues.

To illustrate this point, let us briefly look at the cookery of Campania in southern Italy. For someone who acquired the traditional cuisine from childhood on and since has studied the history of the cuisine, what is most striking is its remarkable continuity over many centuries: the most salient changes together reflect the relatively recent shifts in availability of the most desirable traditional foodstuffs (meat, pasta, fresh seafood) thanks to marked increases in prosperity starting in the nineteenth century and then intensifying in the twentieth century. For the middle and lower classes, there are almost no dishes with a foreign pedigree outside of the realm of desserts, where there are indeed some which have trickled down from the local elite

exocuisine. And with regard to the alleged revolution brought about by the introduction of new foods through the Columbian Exchange, each one is a clear case of the borrowing simply of an ingredient which stands alongside older native ingredients and was, in effect, plugged into existing culinary rôles. Even the tomato, whose rôle is now clearly very important in the cuisine (though not so important or ubiquitous as outsiders believe) has in its primary function as a sauce merely taken over and expanded the rôle of broth generally and meat broth in particular; as such it was first exploited by the region's poor, who had limited access to meat, and only very gradually was it accepted then by the local elite.

All cuisines change over time and all take up foreign elements but the rate of change and the structural importance of foreign additions are crucial questions which are ignored when one claims that all cuisines are hybrids. Would it be useful to say 'all languages are hybrids' and give the same status to, say, Icelandic – which has borrowed some words over its history but has maintained to a tremendous degree the grammatical structure and lexicon that it had when the island was first settled – as we give to English – which has undergone accelerated grammatical change through its contact with Norse in parts of England and massive foreign lexical influence from French after the Norman Conquest – and to Haitian, which arose through the complex process of creolisation? Are these all just hybrids?

The failure in food studies to recognise the different types of cuisines and to regard all in terms of the relative openness of exocuisines has led to a real under-appreciation of not just the conservatism and continuity of traditional endocuisines but also of the structural depth and complexity of some cuisines. And consequently, the field has failed to recognise the reality of culinary death as a result of the breakdown or interruption of the generational transfer of complex culinary systems: survival of a handful of holiday dishes is not the survival of a cuisine.

The Need for Documentation

To conclude, let us return to the analogy to language with which we began. It is estimated that of the 6,000–7,000 languages currently spoken, 50–90% may disappear by the end of the century (Grenoble, 2011, p.27), as many of their speakers shift instead to one of the global languages (e.g. English, Spanish, Russian). Moreover, in Europe, for example, dialects of the major languages are similarly endangered. The endocuisines described in this paper are no less fragile, in danger of being lost if their participants shift to an exocuisine model. Both endocuisines and the smaller indigenous languages/dialects rely crucially upon a locally focussed community; both are vulnerable to globalisation or nationalisation and economic pressures from outside. Indeed, given the enticements of advertising we may surmise that more and more endocuisines will suffer 'cuisine death' by the end of the century.

In response to the imminent threat to many of the world's languages, linguists have embarked on a concerted effort to document as many as possible, both for their scientific value (e.g. discovering the range of variation possible in human language) and to aid in language revitalisation programmes initiated by communities where endangered languages are spoken. For languages which are no longer being acquired by children there is an urgent need for pedagogical materials aimed at adult learners, but the success of such materials depends upon an initial stage of thoroughly documenting how the language works as a system.

Can we extend the analogy from language to cuisine further, and suggest a path by which the death of traditional endocuisines may be averted? If this is possible, it seems to us that three steps must be taken. First is raising awareness: not only of the existence of endocuisines among food scholars, but also of the cultural value of such systems among the people currently participating in the traditional cuisines, pushing back against globalisation. Second is documentation, discussed further below; third is revitalisation in communities which choose to initiate a conscious movement to maintain traditional foodways.

What do we mean by thorough documentation of an endocuisine? There have been some outstanding cookbooks containing cultural observations about endangered cuisines, but as good as they are they do not document sufficiently all that would be important to know. Rather, the project must be undertaken as 'culinary ethnography,' avoiding nostalgia and romanticism about the past, and instead providing a record of what people in the community actually do. The cuisine needs to be appreciated in its systemic context, so we need to know as many details as possible about the culinary calendar, not just celebratory and festive dishes but also commemorative dishes and quotidian dishes. We need to know how people talk and think about their food. Furthermore, what are the communal parameters of variation that they might accept for their dishes? When would they consider that someone has stepped outside the tradition? What are their traditions of food preservation and foraging? What are the ties between cuisine and religion? Between cuisine and medicine? What are the food taboos? How does the community regard the eating habits of other communities that they know about? What memories might the elders of the community have about earlier patterns?

The kind of culinary ethnography called for here of the detailed documentation of endangered traditional cuisines will admittedly never be able to give us a complete description of the community's foodways; nevertheless, such work would obviously be invaluable for scholarly purposes and in addition could, where desired by the local community, aid in lending support to other cultural programmes intended to bolster oppressed or formerly oppressed national or ethnic identities. One caveat, however: would such documentation inevitably end up being appropriated and financially exploited by outsiders?

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