

Kitchen Matters: Ethno-cuisines & Contemporary Foodways

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Abstract

Food and food preparation have become the subjects of much popular discourse in recent years. Sociological analysis of this phenomenon has made extensive use of published texts such as cookery books and recipes from women's magazines. Surprisingly, however, informal or 'home' recipes have received much less attention. This paper draws on recipes collected during an investigation of culinary practices in a multicultural community in Melbourne to highlight the effectiveness of this underutilized analytical tool. Data derived from recounted recipes suggest that enduring attachments to distinct ethno-cuisines are providing a partial counterweight to the standardization and homogenization characteristic of rationalized food systems. At the same time it reveals how ethnically-defined food cultures are themselves evolving and becoming partially rationalized in an intricate interplay between tradition and innovation in contemporary foodways.

Keywords: recipes, food habits, tradition, innovation, rationalization, ethnicity

Introduction

Recipes are cultural artefacts and as such reveal much about the social context in which they appear (Cook and Crang 1996). There is an established tradition in the sociological literature of using published recipes to shed light on the social, political and economic processes affecting not only the production and consumption of food, but social relations more broadly. Recipes recorded in books and magazines have been used to observe continuity and change in social life over time (Mennell 1985; Sheridan 2000; Warde 1997), to document transitional phases of migration, place, hybridity and creolization (Chee-Beng 2007; Choo 2004; Mamak 2007), and as statements of national and regional histories (Appadurai 1988; Narayan 1995). Less

common in the literature, however, is the use of informal recipes which are actually employed in the home. In marked contrast to anthropologists, sociologists have been slow to focus on food practices in the domestic sphere, and when they have, the data generated has been used primarily as memoirs of lived experience, as data regarding quotidian life, or as reflections of day to day domestic cookery, food choices and eating habits which are tied up with identity and subjectivity (Lupton 1996).

Our research on food habits in an inner-urban multicultural site in Melbourne suggests, however, that the data gleaned from recipes used in homes can also shed light on the historical processes transforming both contemporary foodways, and broader issues of social life. In this paper, we use findings drawn from a project examining the role traditional cooking and eating practices play as a counterweight to the homogenization, standardization and over-processing that has been an outcome of the industrialization of food production to illustrate the richness of data embedded in participants' recounting of home recipes.

Preliminary data has found among many respondents an appreciation of the benefits accrued from the rationalization of food production and consumption that has accelerated since the mid-twentieth century, including the ready supply of relatively cheap, varied and abundant food, and the labour savings offered by pre-prepared products. At the same time, there is considerable concern about the bland tastes and undistinguished flavours of highly processed foods, and the nutritional detriments associated with them. Our data also reveals, however, that enduring attachments to ethno-cuisines are providing a partial counterweight to the rationalization of contemporary global food systems. In what follows, we use personalized, 'home' recipes to shed new light on an intricate interplay between innovation and tradition in

distinct and diverse food cultures, and their role in participants' attempts to avoid the negative consequences of rationalization.

The Research

Thirty people from an inner urban multicultural suburb in Melbourne took part in the study. While recording semi-structured interviews which ranged across various food-related topics such as the buying, preparing and eating of daily meals, participants were asked if they would like to relate a favourite recipe they thought reflected their 'typical' food habits. 'Recipe' was loosely defined as a description of the construction of a meal they enjoyed cooking and eating. Although not everyone interviewed offered a formal recipe in the sense of a list of ingredients and techniques, most participants did contribute a 'recipe story'.

As a methodological device, the request for a recipe added an extra dimension to the overall interview data, enhancing the participant's descriptions of cultural attachments and inherited and acquired tastes, exposing practices that would not have been accessed simply by enumerating elements of their diets, and revealing the complex influences on and meanings associated with the preparation and consumption of food.

Five key themes emerged: firstly, the deep importance of culinary traditions as markers of ethnic identity; secondly, the persistence and maintenance of diverse ethno-specific culinary traditions; thirdly, the plasticity of these traditions, evident particularly in the processes of individualization and hybridization; fourthly, rationalization internal to traditions; and finally the recourse to tradition as a bulwark against the perceived negative consequences of the mass production of food.

Identification with ethno-specific food traditions flowed strongly through the recipe recitations, with typical responses connecting recipes with other cultural expressions of ethnicity such as celebratory occasions and ethno-defining styles and methods of

food preparation. In an account of roasting goat meat for an Easter feast, Alethea¹ said:

You always add oregano and garlic for the Greekness... even if we ask our Aussie friends.

The depth of the connection between ethnic identification and food was particularly evident in nostalgia for tastes and cultural food preferences learned in childhood. Miranda elegantly captured the profound and embodied nature of the tie between food and ethnicity (Lupton 1996) while sharing her mother's recipe for *galaktaboureko*:

She got this recipe from her mum. She was very torn about being separated from her family because she came over here when she was sixteen and she had nobody here... And it's made from milk... Mother's milk, you know?

Another interviewee, who had no experience of cooking at all, was able to give an account of a complicated regional Iraqi dish he remembered from attending festive occasions with relatives in his youth. Although it was not necessarily a favourite food, and was too 'heavy' to eat in Australia, *pacha* remained an important part of his cultural memory.

It was evident, moreover, that while reciting recipes, people were also relating the importance of preserving and passing on aspects of traditional cultural attachments. Most participants not only maintained the traditions they had inherited, but also actively sought to pass them on. One woman had translated her mother's original recipes into English in order to preserve them for her own, non Italian-speaking, grandchildren. Rosalea's observation on the value of teaching her adult son to look after himself was also underscored by notions of intergenerational exchange and preservation:

I can do it for him but... I was teaching him one day how to do the minestrone... with a bit of pasta you've got left over you can make it

beautiful and nourishing... in the evening with a bit of crusty Italian bread and you know... it's good to hand him those Italian traditions.

Another participant, describing how he now cooks his father's '*eggy, peppery, weekend stew*' for his own children, said the ritual still held strong associations of his Macedonian heritage for him and was something he would pass on in the same way it was passed to him.

The traditions which the participants imbibed and embodied were also clearly 'living': while implicit or explicit claims of authenticity were common, so too was a willingness to innovate and to incorporate the consequences of creativity within the tradition. Two distinct vectors of innovation emerged. Firstly, in the multicultural setting of the study, hybridization and creolization were prominent. Sabine, a Spanish woman married to a Croatian man, created a cooking repertoire they both found reminiscent of the food they ate as children even while taking some liberties with the authenticity of the dishes. Without jettisoning her own remembered tastes and traditions, she had been able to incorporate aspects she believed also catered for her partner's cultural memory:

I like the beans [so] I soak too. Then after, I put the lentils, the carrots, a little potato, the peppers. I put the silverbeet a little bit later. Also you are putting a little bit of stock. Just me, I use the Vegeta – the Croatian – that's what I use... Without that it's not really tasty.

For Altair, it was a trip to Japan which led him to adapt his Egyptian grandfather's recipe:

A good old fashioned Middle Eastern chick pea salad... but add to that a handful of nicely soaked hijiki. Putting a totally Japanese element into [it] works very well.

In other cases, it was the exposure to and availability of diverse food traditions which was significant. Indeed, while inherited culinary knowledge and cooking skills were viewed to be important by all participants, many felt the variety of produce now

available and dissemination of ideas from diverse ethnic cuisines untethered them from the sometimes restricting diets of their forbears. Veronica will now only cook Maltese food when she entertains older relatives, complaining she has had so much of it she now finds it boring. Matilda also discussed food variety in her concerns about balancing her children's nutritional needs, observing that a greater range of ingredients are easier for her to source than would have been the case for her parents. The second notable source of innovation revealed by the data was a widespread inclination to individualize or 'personalize' culinary traditions. A number of authors have highlighted the ways in which the growing individualization characteristic of contemporary social life has reworked engagement within modern foodways (Crouch and O'Neill 2000; Fischler 1988). Our research found that such evolving 'idiocuisines' (Sokolov 1991) are a key interface between tradition and innovation.

Tony protested when asked if his *youvetsi* recipe was a traditional one:

No, it's no (sic) a tradition. Its some people don't like bananas, some people they don't like or don't want to try other food...

Lazar's certainty about the ingredients in his goulash also had little to do with the heritage of the recipe – his grandmother had cooked it one way, his father another and he used his own style to prepare the dish – and more to do with his own awareness of flavour and quality:

I never put tomato in the goulash – a lot of people do – but I don't think it goes. I think that relish is much, much better...

Nadia commented:

I do borrow from mum's recipes, from her favourites... and I've changed them.

In fact, several participants had changed inherited recipes so much with their inventive approaches that the parents who had handed them on no longer recognized

the dish. One woman explained how she liked to experiment with different spices and flavours rather than experience the same tastes repeatedly lest she get tired of them.

She commented:

My mother would turn in her grave if she knew what I have done to her recipes.

Some innovations, however, are not always entirely successful. Nadia reported that her mother

... reaches out and makes other stuff but it always tastes Italian. You know, she makes stir fry and you go, 'this is Italian!' I think cos she uses olive oil and she puts the garlic and the basil. The way she makes it! She goes, 'it needs more tomatoes'. You know, we say 'it's not really a Chinese meal mum'.

Such innovations should not be seen as being at odds with the idea of the persistence of traditions. Many commentators have highlighted the plasticity and fluidity of culinary traditions, and observed that traditional food cultures are often kept alive by continual processes of adaptation and hybridity (Gabaccia 1998) and extended through trade, technology, migration and intercultural exchange (James 2005). They are defined precisely by a lack of consistency across time (Warde 1997). Indeed, the fact that culinary traditions take a long time to develop, and their reliance on constant working and reworking (Symons 1993), makes them inherently open to re-interpretations.

The data collected also suggests that the elasticity of traditions is sufficient to encompass significant elements of rationalization within traditional cuisines. In fact, although the preservation of traditional practices was common, and seen by those maintaining them as vital, even the most ardent traditionalists embraced elements of the rationalized food system. Most conspicuous in this regard was the resort to convenience products, with most of the participants prepared to use time-saving

shortcuts on occasions. Pina told how she and her friends were pleased to find sundried tomatoes and other Italian products appearing on the shelves of mainstream supermarkets:

... We don't have to do all that work anymore; we don't have to work so hard now.

The multiple facets of the interplay of tradition and innovation we have distinguished analytically – hybridization, individualization and rationalization – were in practice frequently overlapping and interlaced, as evident when Kuai reported experimenting with 'fusion' food during short breaks in his busy working schedule. Combining convenience products, time-saving devices and ingredients from several cultures he arrived at [a]:

Stir fry with Campbell's pasta sauce with meat, adding prawns and char sui and finish off by drizzling light soy sauce, sesame oil and a touch of curry powder. Try it... it should take no more than ten minutes to do.

Finally, the fifth theme to emerge from the research was the significance of ethno-defined culinary traditions in participants' attempts to counter the negative consequences perceived as stemming from rationalized foodways. For some participants, the primary concern was taste. Lazar's advice for *goulash* was a case in point:

The big thing is lots of paprika. Which is coming in the relish and you're adding it as well in the powder form. And if you're assured it is good quality Hungarian paprika, that's alright. Or get Spanish stuff. Don't just go and buy the supermarket stuff cos it's cut with flour.

For Rosalea, minestrone also depended on unprocessed ingredients:

You can buy a little sachet for about seven dollars in the supermarket but its absolute rubbish.

For others, the longevity they attributed to traditional practices was seen as an indicator of quality and safety, and as a buffer against risks inhering in modern food

production processes, such as compromised nutrition and the perceived dangers of genetically modified foods. Nadia recalled an Anglo boyfriend from her youth being hesitant to eat her mother's home-made salami and sundried tomatoes. 'Try these, they're great' she had urged. When he refused, she said 'They've been making them for centuries; they know what they are doing.'

For many, suspicion of mass production processes and a rejection of the homogenization of food prompted measures which they felt was a return to tried and trusted ways their parents or grandparents would have recognised, such as avoiding supermarkets, shopping through food co-operatives or farmers markets, choosing organic produce when they could afford it, using only in-season fruits and vegetables, growing their own food and exchanging produce with neighbours. They were reassured that this gave them a healthier and more environmentally sustainable relationship with their food and food providers than the mainstream could provide.

Conclusion

Patterns of consumption have changed radically in Australia over the past twenty years and the impacts of globalized commodity flows have been pervasive. The attraction of a system which delivers relatively cheap, multifarious food choices to the consumer is evident in the rapid spread of consumer culture in the late twentieth century (Atkins and Bowler 2002; Symons 2007). At the same time, the proliferation of sites such as specialty food stores, farmers markets, the organic and Slow Food movements along with the expansion of tourism and a massive increase in publishing surrounding food and food preparation have created opportunities for people to discover and explore food from many diverse cultures; and the emergence of a global food system in which the capriciousness of seasonal cycles has been 'solved' by the

constant flow of commodified produce across the world has allowed them to put their discoveries into practice in their own homes.

The participants in the study reported here all embraced the wide variety and convenience of produce now available to them; however, there was also a concomitant questioning of the undistinguished flavours of much mass-produced food, and considerable concern about the perceived dangers of highly processed foods. In some cases conscious efforts were made to avoid the negative consequences of standardization and massification of foodstuffs, and attachment to keepsakes of traditional culinary knowledge played an important role in this quest, even as they were updated through exchanges, personalized touches and innovative use of ingredients. Like Sabine, many participants combined traditional methods and ingredients with signature elements from other cuisines and labour-saving convenience products. Overall, the data suggests that the persistence of distinct, albeit constantly evolving and partially rationalized, ethno-cuisines provides a variety of food options which is at odds with notions of the emergence of a creolised, undifferentiated 'global stew' (James 2005).

At times spontaneous creation, at others born from necessity, the interplay between innovation and tradition evident in participants' daily exercise of getting food cooked and eaten has illustrated the highly mutable character of the human relationship with food. The study from which this paper is drawn is exploring the impact of the broader social dynamics on the perpetual human exercise of answering the question of what to eat. It found that home recipes were a particularly useful tool for this purpose. Contemporary foodways are shaped by the shifting balance between the availabilities of time and money, the resilience of traditional food habits and cultural taste preference, unprecedented opportunities for hybridization and growing emphasis on

individual choice. Personalised 'home' recipes were able to shed new light on these sometimes contradictory influences not only because they elicited rich data about meanings attached to food, but also because they occupy a unique position at the intersection of the transmission of traditional food cultures and the acquisition of new cooking practices.

Notes:

¹ All names used in this study are pseudonyms.

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