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Introduction

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Introduction

It is currently commonplace to quote the nineteenth-century French philosopher Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's observation that, loosely paraphrased, asserts "you are what you eat" ([1825] 1971:3). What this claim actually means, however, is open to interpretation.¹ At the 2006 annual meeting of the American Folklore Society, a panel organized by Bill Ellis explored this topic, focusing on the relationship between food and identity in the Americas. The articles included in this special issue are based on that panel, and the participants address the ways in which particular identities are shaped by discriminatory cultural attitudes, forgotten historical forces, or unequal social hierarchies. Identity in the present emerges out of identities of the past and often hides or reinterprets that past. Food is a common medium through which these processes occur and can be examined. Food advertising, films, cookbook publishing, restaurant trends, and even the fascination with television cooking shows and food tours are not simply celebrations of what we eat; they are vehicles for the public and private construction, negotiation, and manipulation of identity. Folklore, with its emphasis on ethnography and its recognition of the personal and the aesthetic, offers rich insights into these processes.

Food has long been a subject of folklore scholarship. It can be argued that the study of food was embraced by the 1888 inaugural mission statement of the American Folklore Society, which defined the field's focus as "the fast vanishing remains of Folk-Lore in America" ("On the Field" 1888:3). This initially translated into attention to the foods and food practices existing in the oral traditions of those groups considered "folk," particularly those foods that seemed in danger of dying out and being replaced by more modern, industrial foods, as seen in John G. Bourke's 1895 *Journal of American Folklore* article, "Folk-Foods of the Rio Grande Valley and of Northern Mexico." However, little else on food was published in *JAF* for the next seventy years, food was often not included as a "major genre" in folklore textbooks, and it was not used "to think with," as the expression goes. That changed in the 1970s, due in large part to Don Yoder, who brought food under the wing of folklife studies, emphasizing the need to study the totality of practices and beliefs surrounding eating and food. Yoder's article "Folk Cookery" in Richard Dorson's 1972 anthology, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, summarized much of the contemporary understanding of food. He also inspired a generation of scholars at the University of Pennsylvania—including Jay Anderson (1971), Janet Theophano (Goode, Theophano, and Curtis 1984; Theophano

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2002), Charles Camp (1989), Amy Shuman (1983), Angus Gillespie (1984, 1999), Leslie Prosterman (1995), Mario Montaña (1997), and Kathy Neustadt (1992)—not only to study food but also to apply to that topic ideas from sociolinguistics and structuralism that were influencing the study of folklore at the time. Also in the early 1970s, Michael Owen Jones taught courses on food at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Alan Dundes encouraged students to explore the subject at the University of California, Berkeley. This work was all set solidly within the paradigm shift occurring internationally in folklore studies that focused on context over text and process over product. Much of it interpreted food as an expression of identity, as well as a means by which communities both construct their own identities and maintain group boundaries.

The late 1970s saw a surge in the folkloristic study of food with the establishment of a journal, *Digest: An Interdisciplinary Review of Food and Foodways*.² A number of anthologies followed that are seminal to food studies, as well as to furthering folklore theory: *Foodways and Eating Habits: Directions for Research* (Jones, Giuliano, and Krell 1983), *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States* (Brown and Mussell 1984), and “*We Gather Together*”: *Food and Festival in American Life* (Humphrey and Humphrey 1988). These works established a body of scholarship firmly grounded in ethnographic research that both celebrated the creativity of individual tradition bearers and their communities, and used this data to explore how groups are constructed and maintained.

Later anthologies continued the tradition of using food to illuminate and further folkloristic theories of identity and cultural production, including *Rooted in America: Foodlore of Popular Fruits and Vegetables* (Wilson and Gillespie 1999) and *Culinary Tourism: Eating and Otherness* (Long 2004). More recently, *JAF* published two major articles on the topic, Millie Rahn’s “Laying a Place at the Table: Creating Public Foodways Models from Scratch” (2006), in which she explores the use of food in public folklore work, and Michael Owen Jones’s 2005 AFS presidential address, in which he calls upon folklorists to expand our understandings of food and identity and also to apply our food research to practical problems in contemporary health issues (Jones 2007). Similarly emphasizing that food is both intrinsically connected to issues outside of academia and one of the most powerful venues through which folklore concepts can be “translated” to the public, Charles Camp in 2003 curated a traveling exhibit for the Smithsonian Institution titled “Key Ingredients: America by Food” (Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service 2003). The Smithsonian Institution also focused on food during their 2005 Festival of American Folklife (see Prior 2007), and a number of excellent Web sites on food traditions have recently been developed around the country (see, for example, Iowa Arts Council 2007).

Folklorists obviously have much to contribute not only to the interdisciplinary field of food studies but also to a deeper understanding of local identity within a global context.³ Unfortunately, our voices are frequently dismissed as romanticizing the subject and presenting food traditions as if they exist in a neatly bounded universe of their own, free of constraints imposed by the realities of race, class, and gender (see, for example, Bell and Valentine 1997; Ashley et al. 2004). As Holly Everett points out in this issue, folklorists tend to celebrate individuals’ agency and creativity in

shaping the meanings of their traditions, and that celebration is often misunderstood as a willful ignoring of the politics surrounding those traditions. Although I would argue that folklorists have not romanticized food in the past, I do agree that we have not always clearly articulated how such politics play into food traditions.⁴

This issue of *JAF* contributes to such an articulation. The authors address the topic directly, examining how the expression of identity through food is shaped and constrained by political structures larger than (and frequently hidden to) the individual or local community. They also deal with foods that carry negative connotations or with histories that consumers do not want to celebrate. In doing so, the authors also demonstrate some of the distinctive ways in which folkloristics can contribute to food studies, as well as the ways in which foodways scholarship contributes to theory and methods in folkloristics in general.

All three articles address questions of methodology. Both Holly Everett and Theresa Preston-Werner conducted extensive ethnographic research in the cultures that they discuss. As a basic technique of folkloristic research, ethnography focuses on recognizing the native genres, categories, and meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Ben-Amos 1971).⁵ Foods carry a multiplicity of meanings. Ethnography encourages the scholar to listen to how individuals speak through food and to attend, as Preston-Werner points out, to how their own questions may shape the answers that they receive. In her study of *gallo pinto* (rice and beans) in Costa Rica, she found that she needed to recognize an emic perception of tradition, rather than trying to force her findings into a preconceived mold. Her field experiences caused her to expand her research focus from demonstrating her theory that this iconic dish had originated among slaves to understanding why that theory was so adamantly rejected. Racism, she discovered, had shaped the common misperception of *gallo pinto* as representing a white heritage. Everett's article grows out of her research on culinary tourism in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. She combined social science methods (questionnaires and surveys) with observation of tourist behaviors and in-depth interviews with tourists and tourism producers. In contrast to traditional ethnographies, which in the past had focused on geographically and socially bounded communities, much of her work was with outsiders who came as tourists to the province. Their interactions with the locals tended to be of a commercial nature. Food in these contexts became a commodity valued both for entertainment and as a representation of a public identity. In seeming contrast, Bill Ellis's work on ice cream parlors in the early-twentieth-century United States demonstrates the ways in which historical materials can be read as ethnographic data. His starting point is a 1910 urban legend that represents these parlors as dens of iniquity where innocent young women were stolen for white slavery. His article seeks to understand why a food that is now perceived as innocuous was originally shrouded in rumor and fear, and this leads him to explore a number of histories: those of ice cream, of commercial food distribution, of ethnicity and immigration at the turn of the century, and of gender roles in the United States.

Although ethnography is a methodology in a number of disciplines, within folklore studies it often refers to a specific approach that draws upon Dell Hymes's ethnography of speaking model (1962) and performance theories developed by Dan

Ben-Amos (1971), Roger Abrahams (1977), Richard Bauman ([1977] 1984), and others. This ethnographic tradition insists on understanding meaning as personally as well as socially constructed and on interpreting these meanings as the result of individual choices selected from a range of cultural options. This approach to meaning acknowledges that the political—issues of power, hierarchy, and status—shapes the options available to individuals and the choices that they make. Folklorists have historically tended to focus on the connectedness created by traditions and community, whether those communities are the geographically and culturally bounded ones of the stereotypical folk or the looser, more fluid ones of postmodern society. Food is an inherently political topic, involving not just gastro-politics, as Arjun Appadurai has called the issues of food production and distribution (1981), but also commensality, the small-group politics involved in eating together (who sits with whom, who serves, who pays, who chooses menus and recipes; Long 2000; Shuman 1983), and the cultural politics of who controls the meanings and representations of food. Each of these articles addresses the political in relation to its subject matter. Ellis's discussion of ice cream parlors demonstrates how the image of a food that is now considered all-American and wholesome was originally shaped by larger politics of ethnic identity and American isolationism. Everett addresses cultural politics head-on in her exploration of how Newfoundland's tourist cuisine "reproduces socioeconomic hierarchies of power and control" (28, this issue). Similarly, Preston-Werner demonstrates that the heritage assigned to an unofficial national dish plays out submerged racial issues.

At the same time, aesthetics and personal tastes need to be taken into account. These articles do that as well. Rice and beans is eaten for breakfast in Costa Rica, not just to reaffirm a sense of "white-washed" heritage but because many have acquired a taste for it. Legends about Martha Washington accidentally inventing ice cream came about as a response to fears surrounding political issues of the early 1900s—"foreigners" and "white slavery." But the need for those legends was a response to the pleasure that people enjoyed while eating that ice cream. Similarly, fried foods are a widespread part of the Newfoundland diet—fish and chips is an icon of provincial identity—but tourists tend to criticize these foods as fatty and unhealthy. Everett shows how these representations are part of a larger discourse of health morality that stereotypes those from the island as backward. Furthermore, fried food is associated with the working classes by tourists, and this association is not perceived as marketable within the tourism industry.

In fact, all of these articles also deal with foods that have been or are now considered to be reflective of low socioeconomic status and are thought of as somewhat plain and everyday. There is a tendency in food studies to focus on those foods and cuisines that are outwardly complex—that have many ingredients, require many steps for preparation, and demonstrate cultural capital. Folklore as a discipline counteracts that tendency through its insistence on the significance of the ordinary, the everyday, the members of a group rather than just its leaders. "Simple" foods can hold complex meanings, and these articles tease out those meanings. Although folklore also explores the ritual foods used in holiday celebrations and held up as icons of identity or heritage, folklore as a discipline has a definite non-gourmet focus. The

foods presented in these articles—ice cream, rice and beans, and fried fish—would rarely appear in upscale circles, unless they were ironically “cleaned up,” “fancied up,” and made out of expensive ingredients.

Folklore offers to food studies a conception of food as more than just “what we eat.” It is, rather, the aesthetic domain of activities and practices surrounding that stuff. Yoder’s discussion of foodways as the totality of customs, beliefs, and habits around food moved folklorists to look at all of these aspects as interrelated. The products, procurement, preservation, preparation, presentation, and performance of food is a system in which all activities bear upon each other, and meaning emerges out of those relationships.⁶ Activities such as washing dishes, shopping for groceries, or growing herbs on the kitchen windowsill can be recognized as contributing to the ways in which we use food and find meaning in it. Ellis, for instance, offers new insights into the cultural history of ice cream by exploring the meanings of the places in which it was eaten, and Everett explores how the particular process of cooking defines the identity of Newfoundland food, even more than the actual ingredients being consumed do.

Finally, these articles demonstrate folklore’s holistic approach to human activity. They explore the connections between expressive domains—legends about food, humor about food, anecdotes about eating, tourist advertising and brochures—that would usually be considered discrete genres. They then examine the ways in which these genres impact, are shaped by, and are understood through the traditions surrounding foodways, and they demonstrate how discussions of tradition and identity surrounding food are relevant to understanding issues of health, public safety, racism, the commodification of identity, and nationalism.

These articles take us beyond Brillat-Savarin’s often-quoted line to provide a nuanced understanding of how we define, express, and construct ourselves through food. Using the lens of culinary tourism, in which individuals explore otherness via food, they demonstrate that those individuals do not necessarily become what they eat. Instead, they use that food to sample the experiences of an other, to explore their relationship to that other, or to better define the boundaries between themselves and others. In doing so, they negotiate their own identities and develop strategies for balancing the public with the private, the political with the aesthetic, and the social with the personal.

Notes

1. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin published his *Physiologie du gout* (The physiology of taste) in France in 1825. The actual passage in French is rarely published, but it is translated by M. F. K. Fisher ([1825] 1971) as “Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are,” which carries different implications from the usual paraphrase. The first use of the phrase in folklore scholarship seems to be Roger Welsch’s article, “We Are What We Eat” (1971).

2. The first issue was published in 1978 by students from the University of Pennsylvania Department of Folklore and Folklife. Janet Theophano and Leslie Prosterman were the first editors.

3. By the nature of its subject, food studies is an interdisciplinary field that tends to cross the usual boundaries between the humanities and sciences, as well as between academic and public (or applied) research. As a relatively new field, food studies is still developing a cohesive body of theory and methodology. Leading practitioners come from the disciplines of American studies, history, anthropology, soci-

ology, and folklore, but many also have professional experience in the culinary arts, hospitality management, tourism, nutrition, public policy, environmental science, agriculture, and journalism. The field readily addresses issues of race, class, and gender in food and also displays an unabashed enthusiasm for its subject as an aesthetic and experiential domain. This enthusiasm often translates into food tastings and cooking demonstrations.

A number of more established disciplines include food within their purview, and several scholarly organizations focus on food. Along with the nutrition and agriculture branches of anthropology and sociology associations, the most notable of these—and the most relevant to folklorists—are the European Conference on Ethnological Food Research (established 1975) and the Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS), which began holding annual meetings in 1987. Collaborating with the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, the ASFS has emerged in the last ten years as the primary organization for food studies research in the United States. The title of the ASFS's journal, *Food, Society, and Culture: An International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, reflects its broad scope, and the journal's contents represent the cutting edge of contemporary food research. Also of interest to folklorists are the publications *Gastronomica* and *Food and Foodways: Explorations in the History and Culture of Human Nourishment*.

4. Numerous studies in folklore address power structures, inequalities, and disjunctures in communities and traditions. In one of the seminal anthologies on food, Simon Bronner wrote about the unpleasantries of turtle butchering and stated that “disparities as well as continuities in individual behavior and thought must be significant to the analysis of foodways” (1983:121). See also Neustadt (1992), Montañó (1997), and Lockwood and Lockwood (1991, 2000). For publications in food studies that deal more directly with power, see Bentley (2002), Belasco and Scranton (2002), Goody (1982), Mintz (1985), and the chapters in Counihan (2002) and Counihan and Van Esterik (1997). Based on fieldwork and attending to issues of meaning, Deborah Barndt's influential 2002 study *Tangled Routes: Women, Work, and Globalization on the Tomato Trail* demonstrates imbalances of power within the contemporary food system.

5. There are a wide range of approaches to ethnography in folklore studies. On ethnographic methods in the field, see, for example, Feintuch (2003) and Toelken (1996). On the use of oral tradition as historical data, see Dégh (1969) and Dorson (1971).

6. For articles that have developed the idea of foodways in a more systematic way, see Theophano (1984), Camp (1989), and Long (1999).

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