

The Heirloom Tomato as Cultural Object: Investigating Taste and Space

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Abstract

This article asks how the heirloom tomato emerged as a cultural object in the late twentieth century, from something grown by individual seedsaving gardeners into a status symbol available for \$7 a pound at speciality markets. This article finds that a combination of structural changes (increasing industrial farming on the one hand, and the turn to organic, local and 'authentic' food experiences on the other) as well as the activities of individual activist chefs and seedsavers has led to the tomatoes' emergence in a broader arena of consumption. But the article also reveals a significant spatial dimension to this apparent change in meaning. The heirloom tomato certainly emerges as a symbol of elite status in the pages of popular magazines and newspapers by the early twenty-first century – but the act of 'distinction' and the marketplace in which it happens are spatially demarcated and do not interfere with the access of non-elites to the object. Thus I offer an explanation of how this cultural object is created over time, but at the same time emphasise the importance of attending to location and spatiality in the study of taste, distinction and culture.

Introduction

Yes, we love 'Roma' and 'Beefsteak' types. But most of our tomato patch is dedicated to heirloom varieties. They are more than a gourmet's delight. Every seed is a kernel of history, and a promise to preserve genetic biodiversity. Heirloom tomatoes offer wild colors and pure flavor. Try a tiny, intense currant tomato or a huge 'Brandywine.' You'll taste the essence of summer. (Martha Stewart *Living* 2000, p. 69)

Walking through a farmers' market somewhere in the USA in the heat of August, it is hard to miss the abundance of these tomatoes that are such an object of Martha Stewart's affection. They are piled high in colours ranging from near black to pink or green. Some are fuzzy, some as small as grapes, others large and lobed looking almost like bell peppers. Their skins are often fragile, prone to splitting and poorly suited for lengthy journeys in refrigerated trucks. The prices are often high, depending on the moment in the growing season. The actual flavours vary widely, but

in general the fans of such tomatoes hail them for their tomatoey taste, in contrast to that of the mass-produced hybrids designed for the bigrig transport system and the supermarket produce section and literally bred to resemble projectiles. (Adams 1983, p. 9) The last decade has seen a significant increase in the popularity of heirloom tomatoes in the USA, as they have made their way not only into backyard gardens, but also into grocery stores, restaurant kitchens, cookbooks and the pages of popular newspapers and magazines, as well as the fields of organic and conventional small farmers (and, increasingly, agribusiness farms).

But, as *Sunset Magazine* asked in 1995, 'Where have they been all our lives?' (Johnson and Swezey 1995). Why did heirloom tomatoes come to prominence when they did? The heirloom tomato has clearly made a quantum leap out of the garden and into the pages of the *New York Times* and the kitchens of some of the country's most trendsetting restaurants, as well as supermarket shelves and farmers' market stands. But the heirloom tomato long toiled in obscurity, ripening quietly in the backyards of tomato fanatics and solitary seedsavers (Jabs 1984; Nazarea 2005). How did it make this quantum leap, emerging both as a cultural object and as a biological object? In other words, how did growing numbers of consumers acquire a taste for heirloom tomatoes, learning to love tomatoes that don't fit the mould to which they are accustomed, and paying \$7 per pound for bug-eaten, calloused, mottled and splitting tomatoes that may or may not taste good?

Thus I ask how the meanings of heirloom tomatoes change (from the realm of private production to conspicuous consumption), but also *where* meanings change, or where and how the changing meanings relocate the tomatoes themselves. As Fine (2001, p. 231) notes, 'It has become commonplace to suggest that you are what you eat. However, it is equally appropriate to suggest that you are *where* you eat'. The growing taste for heirloom tomatoes among elites opens up new spaces of consumption (high-end restaurants, farmers' markets and grocery stores) and production (whether in smaller organic farms in the Midwest or larger industrial greenhouses in northern Mexico) for the heirloom tomato. Thus, changing tastes may offer not only new experiences for consumers, but new opportunities for producers.

The emergence of the heirloom tomato appears to resemble that of other cultural objects, where the efforts of the actors engaged in it combine with broader cultural shifts (DeNora 1991; Wagner-Pacifi and Schwartz 1991; Fine 1995; Ferguson 1998; Zolberg 1998). In this case, seedsavers and chefs figure centrally in the cultivation of the tomatoes themselves and also the cultivation of a taste for them. In addition, interest in local and organic food, including arguments about biodiversity and significant increases in the number of farmers' markets, emerges in part in response to the increase in industrial agricultural production, including the increase in genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the perceived decrease in the flavour and variety of mass-produced and distributed food. But the close examination of heirloom tomatoes presented here also reveals an unexpected trajectory – namely, the centrality of space in understanding and investigating distinction.

As Guthman (2002) points out, a sound understanding of the multifaceted phenomenon of taste is essential to any study of the cultural economy of food. Taste and the actions which it shapes happen in space (Gieryn 2000; Fine 2001).

Food tastes always have material consequences, not only in actual sensation and bodily reproduction, but also in the sense of the work it takes to provide food. For, food tastes are not only produced by representations and passed-on cultural meanings, but also by labor and ecological processes that transform biological material from one state to another. (Guthman 2002, p. 306)

These connections are distinctly visible in the case of the heirloom tomato. The growing popularity of heirloom tomatoes indicates new sites of production and consumption of these tomatoes. The heirloom tomato becomes an often expensive symbol of wealth and taste, but only in key locations. It emerges into a range of marketplaces, but its consumption is spatially demarcated in farmers' markets, restaurants and high-end supermarkets. In this case, elite taste may even increase availability of a good – an object that was once produced and consumed only in private gardens becomes available in the marketplace, but persists in the gardens as well – the same object is produced and consumed in places that are not mutually exclusive.

I begin by offering a discussion of the background of heirloom tomatoes, followed by an overview of the relevant literature on taste and culture. Two separate empirical discussions then reveal the factors contributing to the change in the status of this cultural object over time, as well as the spatial variations in this status. Combining a broad investigation of the rise of heirloom tomatoes with a systematic analysis of changing newspaper coverage, I chart the rise of the heirloom tomato from the garden to the Manhattan restaurant, contributing to the ongoing investigations of taste, culture and space.

Background

What precisely is an heirloom tomato? A guide to heirloom vegetables describes heirloom status (of tomatoes and other produce) in three ways:

1. The variety must be able to reproduce itself from seed [except those propagated through roots or cuttings] ...
2. The variety must have been introduced more than 50 years ago. Fifty years, is, admittedly, an arbitrary cutoff date, and different people use different dates.... A few people use an even stricter definition, considering heirlooms to be only those varieties developed and preserved outside the commercial seed trade ...
3. The variety must have a history of its own. (Watson 1996, pp. 2–3; see also DeMuth 1998)

The term 'heirloom' itself generally applies to varieties that are capable of being pollen-fertilised and that existed before the 1940s, when industrial farming spread dramatically in the USA and the variety of species grown commercially was significantly reduced. Simply because they are 'heirloom' tomatoes does not mean that they are native to the USA – in fact tomatoes are not native to the USA, but rather to South and Central America, and many heirloom varieties such as the Caspian Pink were developed in Russia and other far-off places (Bushnell 2000). The term 'heirloom' also applies to roses, ornamental plants, fruit trees (reproduced by grafting rather than seedsaving) and potatoes, and even to 'antique' or heirloom livestock. In the case of the tomato, the notion of an heirloom promises authenticity and an unusual and pleasing visual experience, until recently entirely absent from supermarket produce

sections, that may have been enjoyed by one's forebears, or at least people like them. They are also prized for their flavour and beauty.

Heirloom tomatoes outdo the modern kinds that most people eat, enthusiasts say, in flavor, tenderness and diversity. There are several thousand heirlooms in all. Some are tangy, some sweet; some as big as grapefruits, others as small as grapes. They come in zebra stripes, heart shapes, emerald greens, deep purples, chocolate browns. (St George 1997, p. CY4)

Taste, culture and food

The heirloom tomato brings together two arenas of analysis – the rich body of theory and analysis that operates under the aegis of the sociology of culture on the one hand and the growing attention to the sociological aspects of food production and food consumption on the other. In particular it is useful to explore the ways that sociologists of culture understand the rise and fall of cultural objects; an approach particularly well-developed in analyses of visual art and music, (Becker 1984; DeNora 1991; Holt 1997; Griswold 2003) but also applicable to food (Fine 1995). Naturally, questions of taste are also deeply intertwined with these investigations (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Guthman 2002).

In studies of cultural objects, fields and paradigms, there is an aesthetic object at the heart of the study – a Beethoven sonata or a light Italian song, raw sea urchins or boiled beef, Duchamp's infamous urinal or the Mona Lisa. The puzzle at hand entails both how these objects move in and out of being considered tasteful and the ways in which tastes for certain aesthetic objects indicate (and indeed maintain) profound distinctions between groups. Investigations of such changes in the conceptions of beautiful and high-status objects have followed the way tastes change over time, how obscure things become normal, how experts and elites emerge, and how cultural objects exist in fields, paradigms and worlds. At the heart of this work are objects and practices that offer a supposedly superior and inherently sensory experience for the consumer. Their popularity changes over time (so that things that were once ugly become beautiful and food that was once inedible becomes delicious), as at first only some people 'recognise' such beauty or flavour. The capability of such recognition appears to overlap with class position and serves not only as a source of pleasure, but also as a technique of one's distinction (Bourdieu 1984). Presumably many of the heirloom tomato varieties have always tasted good, but once technological and corporate shifts sent them into obscurity, extensive cultural and agricultural work has been necessary to bring them back into larger numbers of mouths and markets.

Taste

As Guthman (2002) notes, Bourdieu's analysis of taste also lends itself, for obvious reasons, to the sociological study of food. Bourdieu makes clear that food is not only a means of sustenance and a source of symbolic meaning and emotional and physical comfort, but also a technique of distinction. He discusses everything from breakfast, to fish (too delicate for working-class men), to greasy meat (too heavy for upper-class women), to cake served on cardboard squares ripped from the box it came in.¹ In such

visceral and personal acts, what we put in our mouths is reinforced by and reinforces our social standing relative to others (Bourdieu 1984).

Yet the audiences for markers of distinction are not always clear. If, as Bourdieu asserts, breakfast is sociologically meaningful, we must also note what a private meal it is. Furthermore, even when people are eating publicly, they are not necessarily eating their greasy meats or delicate fish in front of members of other classes, but usually among their own, in restaurants, supper clubs, or workplace cantinas (Fine 2001). Perhaps food's role in class distinction must thus be understood not only as flashing certain signs to members of other classes, but also in terms of the spatiality of eating – in the home, the factory cafeteria, the sushi restaurant across from the bank headquarters. Thus not only what you put in your mouth matters, but where you are when you put it in your mouth matters as well (Fantasia 1995; Caldwell 2004 on McDonald's in France and Russia). Furthermore, where you buy food for home consumption (the spatiality of shopping) plays a role as well – Wal-Mart or Whole Foods, the local bodega or an upscale farmers' market like Manhattan's Greenmarkets or San Francisco's ferry building (Holt 1997; Zukin 2003).²

Culture

In much of the work on culture, there is extensive evidence for the importance of examining both culture change over time, and the spatial expression of taste. The study of the emergence of cultural paradigms – whether French gastronomy or the 'complicated' music of Beethoven – points to the convergence of multiple factors across a span of years in bringing a once-obscure object or practice into the hands of tastemaking elites. An examination of heirloom tomatoes necessarily requires such a temporal analysis, an approach advocated by a range of sociologists who study cultural objects and processes. Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz (1991) for example, show how a cultural object such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial can only be understood over time, analysing its emergence and the changing discourses around the seemingly fixed memorial. DeNora (1991), Bryson (1996), Ferguson (1998), Fine (1995) and Griswold (2003) each point to the vital importance of temporal analysis in studying the intersection of taste with music, food, or literature.

DeNora asks how and why there is a switch to 'complicated' music at the turn of the nineteenth century in Vienna, and finds that the act of distinction is essential to these new perceptions of the aesthetic quality of music. She turns her attention

to the conditions and processes according to which forms of capital are actually constituted and reconstituted over time and to how these forms emerge out of historically specific, micropolitical situations within which the 'definition of cultural nobility' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 2) is at stake. (1991, pp. 310–311)

I share her concern with 'linking two often separate strands within the sociology of culture – on the one hand, concern with the social functions of taste and, on the other, the production of art' (DeNora 1991, p. 311). Similarly, in her study of French gastronomy, Ferguson asks how a whole new set of rules and practices develops for chefs and for the people who consume what is created, imposing a set of rigid practices and

meanings on top of what was once a more disparate set of fields and experiences. Ferguson points out that

however good an idea we may have about how certain fields operate, we know rather less about how they got to be fields.... At what point do structures and sensibilities, institutions and ideologies, practices and practitioners cohere to 'make' the configuration that we designate a cultural field? (1998, p. 599)

While I am concerned here more with cultural objects than with fields, the call to investigate origins, however complex, of both objects and fields, propels my inquiry as well.

Ferguson and DeNora both point to the significance of temporal analysis in investigating changing tastes and emergent fields. But their results also clearly indicate the centrality of taste functioning *in space*, even if they do not emphasise this intriguing result of their analyses. Whether it is barring non-elites from admission to 'complicated', and thus high-status, concerts in Vienna (through overpriced tickets or limited tickets distributed to a limited circle), or producing and serving food at prices and in settings unreachable for many in France, distinction and the ability to enjoy particular aesthetic objects are being enacted in part in spatial ways. Certainly in DeNora's discussion the genius of Beethoven is at the heart – the pure aesthetic object – but she makes clear that complicated music is enjoyed in what amounts to carefully guarded social and physical spaces. For Ferguson, a non-spatial phenomenon is key – the discourse developed in cookbooks and food writing (1998, p. 602) – but it intersects with the profound physicality and spatiality of gastronomy; the kitchens and restaurants where such food is produced and consumed, where chefs and diners can apply and refine the tastes and practices they are acquiring with regard to gastronomy. Both of these cases demonstrate the use of space and how the class and status entrance requirements to the spaces of consumption enforce distinction. As the analysis that follows will demonstrate, heirloom tomatoes also come to be markers of cultural nobility, but unlike hearing Beethoven in nineteenth century Vienna, this new status does not bar the seedsavers and backyard gardeners from continuing to enjoy the pleasures of the heirloom tomato. Here it is clear that taste can have spatial parameters, but in complex and often parallel ways.

Food

A rich site for further investigation of the temporal and spatial qualities of taste is offered by food in general, and heirloom tomatoes in particular. In 1995 Ferguson and Zukin asked why there seemed to be no sociology of food. In the intervening years there have been developments in this direction, but while food has received more extensive attention in rural sociology, it does remain somewhat understudied in other areas of sociology. Ferguson and Zukin found that 'few sociologists have analyzed food in terms of systems of production or consumption, cultural products or cultural worlds, or social context' (Ferguson and Zukin 1995 p. 194). Food production and consumption should be of profound interest to sociologists, especially sociologists of culture – few things are more essential to both human survival and cultural expression. Turning our investigations to food production and consumption means

training our sights on everything from land use to genetic engineering to global politics and economies of scale. Backyard gardeners and the World Trade Organisation alike have a vested interest in this nexus of production and consumption, and sociologists should continue to explore these relationships, including their origins and their consequences. Ferguson and Zukin articulated two primary approaches to the sociological study of food: 'research on the elaboration of culinary paradigms ... social processes of devising rules and standards, the social construction of "taste", and the development of professional communities,' and

research on the social context in which foods are produced and consumed, on the producers and consumers, and the meaning both intended and assigned to the acts and settings of production and consumption. (Ferguson and Zukin, p. 197)

Thus they encourage us to study culinary worlds in the ways that art worlds have been studied by looking at broader communities of experts, audiences and practitioners to understand where art (or food and the meanings and value assigned to it) comes from.

Many analysts have investigated changes in tastes for particular products and their production over time, including Italian pork fat, olive oil, cheese and coffee (Roseberry 1996; Leitch 2003; Tregear 2003; Meneley 2004). Here Tuscan olive oil pushes oil from less fashionable regions (like Turkey or Syria) out of the market, while the popularity of a particular kind of cured pork fat leads inadvertently to the mechanisation of the curing process and the loss of the traditional techniques of preparation. Recent studies have also focused on the production and consumption of food more broadly, including issues surrounding organics, farmers' markets, McDonald's and genetically modified crops, in many cases flashpoints of conflict surrounding questions of consumer desire, environmentalism and markets (Fantasia 1995; Guthman 2002; Lockie *et al.* 2002; Anderson 2004; Caldwell 2004; Hinrichs *et al.* 2004; Finucane and Holup 2005; McMahon 2005). Kloppenburg (1988) and Kloppenburg and Kleinman (1988) have investigated questions of biodiversity, including the vital issue of farmers' changing access to seeds on a global scale, in light of raging disputes over patent rights and genetic engineering. There have also been studies of Slow Food, local food and organic food, examining the apparently rising popularity of (often elite) movements supporting sustainable agriculture and local artisans (Meneley 2004; Parkins 2004; Pietrykowski 2004). Like DeNora and Ferguson, and drawing insight from these specific analyses of food production and consumption in particular, I ask where the cultural object comes from (in this case, the homely and home-grown heirloom tomato that becomes an object of wealth and taste) and how the light in which it is cast changes over time, as well as the nature of the changing relationship between popular conceptions of the tomato (as a carrier of biodiversity, as a status symbol) and the actual spatial locations in which tomatoes are produced and consumed.

Investigating taste in time and space

How, then, did such tomatoes go from being the work of unknown green thumbs in out-of-the-way places to being essential ingredients in the summer menu of any

self-respecting expensive restaurant and to populating the well-set picnic tables and benefit galas of elites across the country? In other words, how did these tomatoes break out of a highly individualised realm into a much more collective arena of consumption and meaning, widely available both as a natural resource and as a symbolic resource, figuring in acts of distinction? Following Griswold (1992, p. 327), it is possible to take both a hermeneutic and an empiricist approach, asking both what heirloom tomatoes *mean* and what they *do*. Such an analysis yields a grounded sociological explanation of how a cultural object emerges over time and also highlights the potential importance of incorporating spatial parameters into analyses of taste.

My analysis indicates that the history of the heirloom tomato can be divided into two relatively distinct eras – pre-popularity and popularity, with the shift occurring in the mid-1980s. This shift also has spatial parameters, as the tomatoes move from being present only in backyards and on kitchen tables and in the barns and garden sheds of a few seedsaving projects, to being in farmers' markets, commercial nurseries, restaurants, school gardens and urban farms like the one in Cabrini Green, supplying heirloom tomatoes and other produce to upscale Chicago restaurants and being present in the culinary discourse of restaurant reviews and cookbooks as well.

I begin, then, with a discussion of the pre-popularity era, rooted in an analysis of gardening guides, cookbooks, seedsaver organisations, histories and other sources. This portion of the study reveals steady, generally behind-the-scenes activity, with activists (primarily chefs and seedsavers) emerging in the 1980s, whose campaigns for local, seasonal food and biodiversity contribute to the emergence of the heirloom tomato in more popular media and in new spatial settings. I then turn to an analysis of newspaper coverage, beginning with the first mentions of heirloom tomatoes and charting their rise in popularity and their concentration in elite consumption. Taking the *New York Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* as two coastal tastemakers, both responding to and fanning the flames of particular trends, I coded every article from 1989 to 2005 that mentions heirloom tomatoes, searching for the recurrent themes, as well as their emergence and persistence. This approach resulted in a study of 344 articles over a 16-year period dating from the first mention of heirloom tomatoes in either paper. These newspapers mention heirloom tomatoes over and over in dozens of restaurant reviews (significantly increasing in number by 2005), as well as in discussions of farmers' markets, public lectures, recipes and gardening tips, both reflecting and creating attitudes about heirloom tomatoes and other such produce.

Clearly people eat heirloom tomatoes because they taste good, but they have also come to be a marker of distinction. The tomato made its way from the garden to the *New York Times* restaurant reviews through identifiable channels that coincided to create this trend. These channels are useful to us as a potential model for the dissemination of cultural objects and for the recoding of objects in ways that have much larger implications not only for the texture of culture, but also for everything from land use and pesticide application, to the survival of small farms and rural economies, to the lunches eaten by schoolchildren. The heirloom tomato illuminates the intersection of macro-level shifts – industrial agriculture, species loss, the development of GMOs, efforts to preserve biodiversity, the Slow Food movement and a broader turn to organic, local and seasonal foods, and micro-level practices – dining out, gardening, shopping,

cooking, and newspaper reading. These broader factors contribute to taste-making, but taste in turn leaves its mark on social and physical landscapes.

The origins of the heirloom tomato

The history of the heirloom tomato in the USA (in particular among European settlers in the eastern USA) actually reaches back less than two centuries, to approximately the 1820s when the tomato began to take hold in US cooking, creeping into cook-books, greengrocers' shelves and gardens (Smith 2001). Part of the impetus behind the growing popularity of the tomato in the early nineteenth century came from farm periodicals and agricultural and horticultural societies, followed by their more widespread cultivation in the 1830s and 1840s (Smith 2001, p. 54). Until the rise of industrial agriculture in the 1940s, this state of affairs did not change significantly. Markets for tomatoes did grow, and more gardeners planted them, but without refrigerated distribution or large-scale industrial farming, most tomato production and consumption was still local, seasonal and relatively heterogeneous.³

In the 1940s US agriculture turned increasingly away from a broader array of crops based on open pollination towards a narrow range of hybrid crops. This led to a significant decrease in the number of varieties available to consumers, but also to breeding for qualities sought by the consumers – colour, shape, a smooth skin and for qualities required to transport the produce without significant damage, which allowed consumers access to produce even when it was not in season locally (Jabs 1984, p. 13). With the growing availability of refrigeration and transportation across great distances, tomatoes were increasingly bred for their longevity and durability and less for their variety and flavour (Smith 2001, p. 153). They became available in non-seasonal and non-local ways, shipped from the temperate climates of Mexico, California, and Dutch hothouses. Indeed, university laboratories were instructed to imagine the tomato as a projectile in their efforts to develop hybrids that could withstand long journeys and extended periods of refrigeration (Adams 1983, p. 9).

The consumption of fresh tomatoes in the USA grew by 23% between 1985 and 2002 (Calvin and Cook 2005, p. 22). Today in the USA approximately 12 million tons of tomatoes are consumed each year and between 25 and 40 million Americans grow their own tomatoes (Smith 2001, p. ix). In 2002, 444,800 acres were devoted to commercial tomato production in the USA and in 2001 3,451 acres were devoted to organic tomato production (Perry and Schultz 2005, p. 106). Tomatoes grown commercially represent only a tiny proportion of the thousands of tomato varieties that still exist. The dramatic reduction in the number of varieties of a given food grown commercially (accompanied by the increased predictability of the market and quality, as well as often lower prices) was a phenomenon that affected far more than tomatoes, including everything from apples and corn to chickens and pigs (Jabs 1984; Bermejo and Leon 1994; Bushnell 2000; Magelssen 2003).

While old varieties were disappearing from the marketplace, small-scale and individual attention to heirlooms was expanding:

A growing interest in heirlooms had spawned at least twelve seedsaving books, nine specialty seed companies, twelve dedicated Web sites, and six grassroots networks in the same time span. (Nazarea 2005, p. 96)

As commercial tomato production developed an increasingly homogeneous product distributed to a growing number of consumers, heirloom tomatoes persisted as the pet projects of backyard gardeners. Approximately from the 1940s until the 1980s, the producers and consumers of heirloom tomatoes were one and the same. People ate what they grew in their backyards, sharing both seeds and tomatoes with friends and neighbours, but by and large heirloom tomatoes were unavailable for commercial purchase. Thus the so-called heirloom tomatoes fell out of the mainstream, but persisted in backyards and gardens, as individuals, usually operating alone or in a very small network, saved seeds from one season to the next. The genetic material essential for the later expansion of commercially available varieties persisted due in part to these nebulous actions of unconnected individuals, motivated by the taste for these tomatoes and to some extent by a commitment to preserving biodiversity.⁴ Nazarea writes of the seedsavers (not only in the USA, but around the world) who preserve biodiversity in what she finds to be beautifully haphazard ways:

With their heirloom plants, seedsavers embroider the landscape with memories that awaken connections to past and place in many of us. Through an informal network of exchange, ritual and celebration, they embellish a countermemory that helps us dig in rather than fade out. (Nazarea 2005, p. x)

As hybrid tomatoes were conquering the commercial market, individual gardeners and seedsavers were continuing to propagate a much broader variety of tomatoes (as well as other crops).

More organised seedsaving efforts also developed, like Kent and Diane Whealy's Seed Savers Exchange and Gary Paul Nabhan's NativeSeedSearch. In 1980 the *New York Times* asked Carolyn Jab's to write an article about seedsavers, an article which eventually resulted in a book that constitutes a watershed in the expansion of the understanding of heirloom crops in general, where she profiled various crops and various seedsavers (Jab's 1984). Jab's found that collectors usually start 'for personal reasons', including nostalgia and family tradition, but often get caught up in the larger mission of preserving biodiversity as well (1984, p. 43). In 1973 the Whealys planted a few seeds from a Bavarian relative and soon after started a group of like-minded seedsavers. By the early 1980s, Kent and Diane Whealy estimated, the group had 'arranged for 250,000 plantings of no fewer than 3000 old varieties, many of which might have died out entirely were it not for their efforts' (Jab's 1984, p. 47). In 1975 he had a six-page list of available heirloom seeds and a group of 29 corresponding gardeners. By the early 1980s the seed list had grown to 200 pages. Today Seed Savers Exchange operates a glossy website with seeds available in exchange for a donation, as well as other fundraising activities and an online giftshop (Seed Savers n.d.a). Whealy says, 'The best way to keep these old varieties alive is to grow them' (cited in Jab's 1984, p. 67). As the Seed Savers Exchange website says:

When people grow and save seeds, they join an ancient tradition as stewards, nurturing our diverse, fragile, genetic and cultural heritage. Our organization is saving the world's diverse, but endangered, garden heritage for future generations by building a network of people committed to collecting, conserving and sharing heirloom seeds and plants, while educating people about the value of genetic and cultural diversity. Few gardeners comprehend the true

scope of their garden heritage or how much is in immediate danger of being lost forever. (Seed Savers n.d.b)

In arenas such as this there is no mistaking the mixture of memory and agriculture and the moral project of preserving multiple kinds of diversity. Yet, as discussed in greater detail below, such arguments are noticeably absent from the more mainstream discussions of heirloom tomatoes.

Tomatoes are only one part of a much larger movement to save seeds in order to preserve both biodiversity and the pleasure of enjoying so many different varieties of food, such as beans, tomatoes, squashes and other produce (and increasingly the breeding of traditional livestock as well). Surely the appeal of heirloom tomatoes and other heirloom food is, in part, the feeling of authenticity that it conveys. If the smooth globes of hothouse tomatoes offer consistency and predictability, the heirloom tomato, with its crevices and unfamiliar colours and even stripes, offers the sensation of both the new (because they are unfamiliar in supermarket produce sections) and the old (because of the name 'heirloom,' but also because of the lore of genetic preservations surrounding such tomatoes and the uneven terrain of personal memory).⁵ Nazarea finds that modernity intensifies these impulses to save seeds, to seek out 'old' forms of produce and thus traces of the past:

In many instances, heirloom plants play a central role in the restoration of landscapes of remembrance. Some of the reasons for the resurgence of interest in garden staples from another time are distinct flavor, beauty, aroma, novelty and whimsy, evocativeness and familiarity, carefree productivity, and drought and insect tolerance. (Nazarea 2005, p. 97)

In the USA published discussions of heirloom species began in specialised publications for organic gardeners and farmers, as well as in seed catalogues. According to a popular guide to heirloom vegetables:

in recent years a grassroots movement – forged by home gardeners, preservationists and small regional seed companies – has begun to bring back the fine old vegetables that our parents and grandparents once enjoyed so that our generation, and those that follow, can rediscover through these heirloom varieties the rich plant heritage we all share. (Watson 1996, p. 1)

Indeed it is difficult to separate the different motivations for seedsaving from one another – memory and tradition are deeply intertwined with commitments to biodiversity:

Delving into the histories of specific varieties is another part of our modern fascination with heirloom gardening. The search can lead us to a deeper understanding of our own traditions and to a greater appreciation of other cultures.... To many people, the true value of heirloom vegetables transcends the simple pleasures of growing and eating them. The seeds become living windows to the past. (Watson 1996, p. 5)

Watson finds that

the real danger [of modern monoculture] lies not so much in planting hybrids for large-scale cash crops but in losing or neglecting the broad genetic base of both wild and cultivated plants that have made these productive hybrids possible. (Watson 1996, p. 5)

It is both private and organised seedsavers that hold onto this genetic base and the well-developed taste for the produce that comes from these seeds (Weaver, 1997).

Becker (1984), DeNora (1991), Ferguson (1998), Griswold (2003) and others point to committed advocates and key actors as being essential to the transformation of cultural objects and the lives of cultural (or art) worlds. There is no mistaking the central role that committed actors have played in the rise of the popularity of the heirloom tomato, although most were operating for reasons much broader than the tomato itself. Seedsaving activists, chefs and restaurant reviewers seem to be key in the transition from the very active practice of gardening to the arguably passive practice of consuming heirloom tomatoes in urban restaurants.⁶ These key actors include seedsavers like Kent Whealy, who sought not only to save seeds themselves but also to spread the idea of the importance of preserving the biodiversity that remains at the end of a century of extinction. In addition, trendsetting chefs like Alice Waters at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, as well as Nora Pouillon at Nora's in Washington, DC, and later Thomas Keller at French Laundry, champion the use of local and seasonal foods and the fostering of lasting relationships between farmers and restaurants.

We also have to take into account the hundreds of other chefs who directly shape people's tastes by introducing them to unfamiliar foods and by publicising particular foods in popular venues like newspapers, websites, magazines, cookbooks and television cooking shows. Backyard, non-activist seedsavers on the other hand, operate in more out-of-the-way places, contributing to the preservation of seeds but generally not figuring prominently in the widespread cultivation of taste for heirloom tomatoes. The seedsavers described by Jobs and, two decades later, by Nazarea, operate by and large worlds apart from these trends. They are carrying on family traditions and family seeds, preserving their personal memory of the tastes of fruits and vegetables and the techniques for cultivating them in out-of-the-way places. Thus they differ distinctly from the *New York Times* readers who adopt the trend, turning to heirloom tomatoes perhaps out of personal memory but mostly because of a promise of a new and distinctive sensory experience or, less frequently, a sense of moral correctness generated by contributing to global biodiversity.

Intersecting forces and trends

As the seedsavers expanded their work, as Jobs published her article and her book, and as places like Chez Panisse (which opened in 1971) and Nora's (which opened 1979, and became the first certified organic restaurant in the USA in 1999) began to take root and serve local, seasonal meals to elite customers, other trends paved the way for (and at times were even aided by) the growth in popularity of heirloom tomatoes. Of particular importance are the increase in farmers' markets, the growing popularity and availability of organic food, and the Slow Food movement and similar approaches, in part as responses to the continued growth of industrial farming and genetic engineering. This is a phenomenon that affects more than tomatoes, and also takes place far beyond the USA. Certainly a growing market for local, traditional and artisanal food has emerged in Europe as well, connected in part to the Slow Food movement, but also emerging independently from it.

The rise in industrialisation and standardisation of food production in the USA and Europe in the mid-twentieth century was in part a way of increasing the productivity and reliability of the food supply, but also interacted with phenomena like the increasing numbers of women engaging in paid labour and an increased demand for prepared foods (and thus for mass-produced agricultural products that lend themselves to industrial scales of distribution and processing).⁷ Following this industrialisation, many analysts found, there was a turn to locally produced food, as well as to alternative sites for purchasing it, such as in farmers' markets (Roseberry 1996; Tregear 2003).⁸ A 1997 *New York Times* article points to the baby boomers as being partially responsible for the rise in the popularity of heirloom tomatoes: a generation growing older, with the time to garden and with a taste for things like gourmet coffee and fancy tomatoes (St George 1997).

'[Heirloom tomatoes have] been very popular,' said Donata Maggipinto, food and entertaining director at Williams-Sonoma. 'We see them as part of a larger trend where people are harking back to foods and types of cooking that were popular years ago'. (St. George 1997)

Tregear (2003) and others see nostalgia as one of the reasons for the turn to these types of food. A search for 'authentic' aesthetic experiences as well as nutrition also propels growing numbers of people to farmers' markets and gourmet stores. Here I delineate the primary factors that shape the context in which heirloom tomatoes made their meteoric rise to popularity. I begin with a discussion of biodiversity and then discuss the other central intersecting factors contributing to the rise in the popularity of heirloom tomatoes.

Biodiversity

As Kloppenburg and Kleinman wrote in 1988:

In what the *Wall Street Journal* has called 'seed wars,' access to, control over, and preservation of plant genetic resources have now emerged as a field of international concern and conflict. The principle arena for this conflict is the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations ... the plant germplasm controversy finds the advanced industrial nations of the North ranged against the less-developed countries of the South. (Kloppenburger and Kleinman 1988, p. 2)

Biodiversity itself began to capture more widespread attention in the 1980s, an awareness that coalesced in events like the 1986 National Forum on BioDiversity organised by National Academy of Sciences and Smithsonian and extensive discussions at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (Nazarea 2005, p. 3). Questions surrounding biodiversity and GMOs continue to be highly contentious. Arguments about the preservation of biodiversity, however, rarely found their way into the newspaper coverage I analysed, but were very present in books and on seedsaving websites. Discussions of biodiversity seem to invoke simultaneously notions of biological and cultural heritage, along with genotypes and phenotypes lasting through generations, both as fondly remembered old-style produce and as the material for future genetic diversity. As heirloom tomatoes grew in popularity, they seem to have shaken off the

biodiversity and seedsaving image. Instead, as we will see, emphasis has shifted to pleasure – aesthetics, flavour and especially restaurant reviews.

Farmers' markets

The rise of the heirloom tomato intersects with other culinary, technological and economic trends. The farmers' market has been a key site of the commodification of heirloom tomatoes. These markets expanded significantly in the 1980s and 1990s, supported in part by institutions like the USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program. (Hinrichs *et al.* 2004, p. 31). While in 1960 there were as few as 100 farmers' markets nationwide, by 2000 there were approximately 2,800 and the number appears to be rising still (Hinrichs *et al.* 2004, p. 34). Community supported agriculture also develops in this period, forging direct links between farmers and communities by having customers buy shares in a farm for an entire growing season, in return receiving boxes of produce every week or two. For a list of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms, see Local Harvest, (n.d.).

Slow Food

The Slow Food movement also took off in the 1990s as heirloom tomatoes were gaining in popularity (Leitch 2003, p. 439). Slow Food seeks to preserve not only genes, but also practices, such as the curing of *lardo di Colonnata* in porous marble troughs that violate EU regulations and are supposed to be replaced with stainless steel. 'Proponents of Slow Food seek to educate taste through exposure to local and regional foodstuffs and through an appreciation of the linkage between food choices and biodiversity' (Pietrykowski 2004, pp. 311, 312). Overall there seems to be a trend among well-off consumers to seek out authentic, rustic food and to use their buying power in part to have exclusive culinary experiences (Bourdieu 1984; Ferguson and Zukin 1995; Leitch 2003; Pietrykowski 2004).

Organics

Finally, the broader phenomenon of the growing popularity of organic food in general also contributes to the general taste formation shaping the rise of the heirloom tomato.

The popularity of organic food is booming. Supermarkets all over the 'post-industrial world are competing with each other to offer more food guaranteed to have been produced, stored and processed without the addition of synthetically produced fertilisers and chemicals' (Burch *et al.* 2001). The value of the industry worldwide is estimated to be in the vicinity of US\$15 billion, growing to US\$100 billion by the year 2010. (Lockie *et al.* 2002, p. 23)

Guthman (2002, p. 305) finds a bifurcated market for organic food – 'one producing lower cost and/or processed organic food for the quasi-mass market and appealing to meanings of health and safety; the other producing higher value produce in direct markets and appealing to meanings of organicism, political change, and novelty'. Furthermore,

a veritable, if still lagging, shift in consumption trends suggests a broadened politicization of food. In that way, Starbucks' introduction of a Fair Trade Blend, the enviable success of Eric Schlosser's *Fast food nation* (2001), the ongoing regulatory battles over GMO labeling, and the remarkable media coverage of the 30th anniversary of Berkeley, California's Chez Panisse are all cut from the same cloth (Guthman 2002, p. 295).

Indeed, these are precisely the factors that set the stage for and interact with the growing popularity of heirloom tomatoes.

Newspaper analysis

These trends in food consumption and production, then, are the context in which heirloom tomatoes emerge into the pages of the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* and other popular media. The newspaper analysis I conducted reveals a changing discourse, as discussions of gardening or biodiversity became overshadowed by restaurant reviews as well as (but to a lesser extent) accounts of elite consumption. But it also reveals the changing locations of heirloom tomatoes, including the creation of markets and other physical sites (restaurants, farmers' markets, supermarkets) where tomatoes become commodities. The results of the analysis of 344 articles published in the *New York Times* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* between 1989 (the first mention of heirloom tomatoes in this era) and 2005 appear in Figures 1–3. Coverage increased significantly beginning in the late 1990s (Figure 1). I also broke the articles down by theme (Figure 2). The primary categories that appeared were (in order of frequency) restaurant reviews and descriptions, gardening, heirloom tomatoes as indicators of elite status, recipes, farming, good flavour, farmers' markets, aesthetics, seedsaving, ordering seeds, nostalgia and biodiversity. This last theme – so essential to the pre-popularity era – figures far less, but does periodically appear in media like Martha Stewart's paean to the heirloom tomato that

Figure 1: San Francisco Chronicle and New York Times coverage, 1989–2005

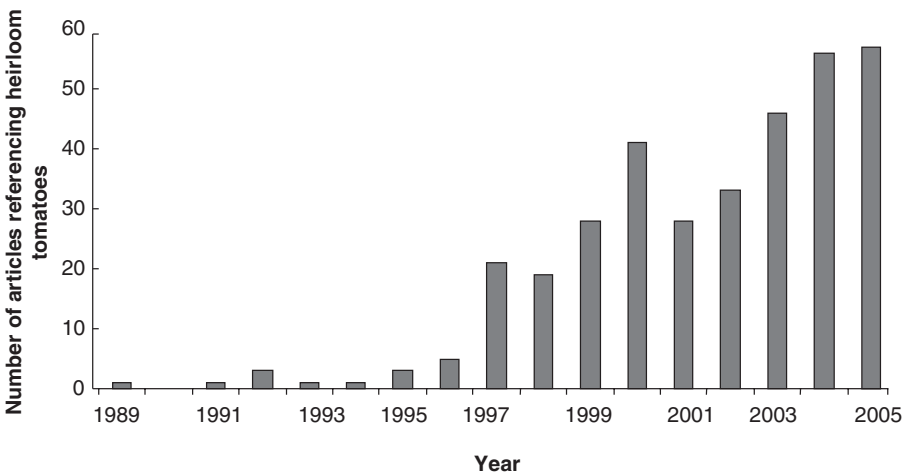


Figure 2: *Newspaper coverage by theme, San Francisco Chronicle and New York Times, 1989–2005*

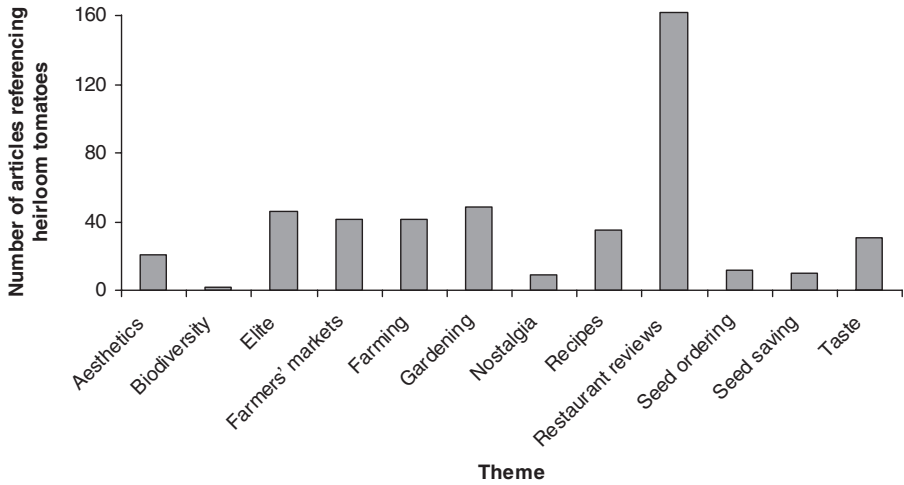
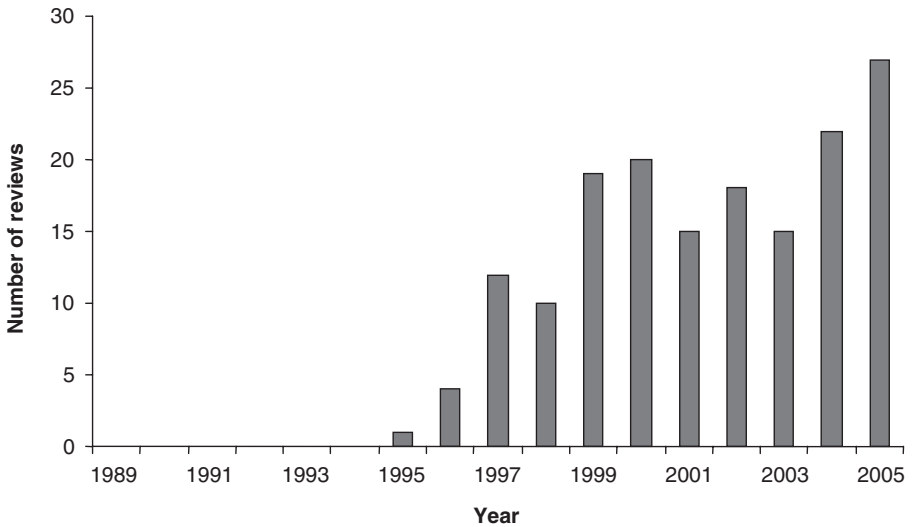


Figure 3: *Restaurant reviews mentioning heirloom tomatoes, San Francisco Chronicle and New York Times, 1989–2005*



opened this article. Based on my initial analysis of gardening manuals and seed-saver projects, I had expected a more consistent invocation of the values of biodiversity. Instead, on both coasts the popular coverage of heirloom tomatoes focuses almost entirely on a combination of pleasure and conspicuous consumption. Restaurant

reviews (Figure 3) offer far and away the most frequent exposure of heirloom tomatoes. Some articles heap praise over colourful tomato salads, while others complain about a chef's willingness to serve up mealy, out-of-season tomatoes just to be sure to have heirloom tomatoes on the menu. Furthermore, a category appeared which I had not initially sought – the invocation of the heirloom tomato as an explicit symbol of an elite lifestyle.

The newspaper results are shaped by the newspapers' collection of food writers over this period, but they show the stark change from a complete absence of heirloom tomatoes in these widely read venues, to the heirloom tomato being essential to discussions of restaurants and coming to stand in as a symbol for elite status. There are sporadic references to biodiversity and steady (if somewhat scanty) references to gardening and seedsaving. The elite discussions and restaurant reviews, however, indicate the emergence of the heirloom tomato as a status symbol. Furthermore, they also reveal the spatiality of such status symbols, bought and sold at lively farmers' markets and at well-heeled supermarkets like Whole Foods, Zabar's, Dean and DeLuca and Fairway. Articles refer to heirloom tomatoes being served at the White House and the exclusive Four Seasons Hotel.

Heirloom tomatoes as a further marker of distinction appear in a wave of associations with elite events and individuals. Actor Vincent Gallo receives a complimentary heirloom tomato salad from a chef while being interviewed, for example, while an opera patrons' dinner in San Francisco serves an heirloom tomato salad to its wealthy donors. These widely distributed messages about heirloom tomatoes show how a status symbol has been created through restaurant reviews and through the coverage describing heirloom tomatoes as symbolic of elite status. At times, the elite references are also somewhat critical, referring to a \$600 pair of jeans as the 'heirloom tomato' of jeans, or wearily describing how 'a thousand heirloom tomato salads bloomed'. Yet the emergence of the heirloom tomato in elite physical spaces and in the pages of the *New York Times* does not decrease the traditional backyard gardener's access to what has become a status symbol, and may in fact increase access by creating a greater demand for seeds and seedlings. Heirloom tomatoes occupy multiple spaces – in some of which they are scarce and expensive, in others (gardens and kitchens) where, at least in high summer in a good year, they are plentiful and almost free.

Discussion

The heirloom tomato as a cultural object has its origin in countless gardens across the USA. But by 2006 the heirloom tomato had also taken on a symbolic weight as a marker of status, evidenced first in its appearance on the menus of expensive restaurants and at substantial prices in farmers' markets, then for \$7 a pound at Whole Foods and other speciality markets, and imported from Mexican hothouses in February. Both elites and seedsavers are motivated by pleasure, albeit pleasure in multiple forms – the visual feast of a plateful of jewel-coloured tomato slices, the satisfaction of robust tomato plants, self-dried tomatoes eaten in the dark of February, or the satisfaction of ordering something so lovely at a restaurant where it is almost impossible to get a reservation. But the tomato's adoption by elites does not make it inaccessible to its original caretakers. Indeed, in a recent interview about his new book on food,

Michael Pollan noted that the best thing to support non-industrial farming in Iowa would be to have a very large city in the middle of it, full of people who seek out organic and heirloom produce from small and local growers (Boudway 2006). Again, as Guthman and others point out, the spatiality of taste includes not only the locations of consumption, but the materiality of production as well.

The heirloom tomato has shifted from being a food produced and consumed in an entirely private way to a food consumed in very public ways, at restaurants in particular, but also at farmers' markets and high-end grocery stores. Consumers can place the tomato in a larger context of taste and authentic experience, promoted first by activist chefs like Alice Waters and Nora Pouillon and later by many others. The dramatic increase in the heirloom tomato's popularity and ensuing commodification over the last two decades have clearly resulted from a convergence of distinct, but interdependent, factors. Without the solitary seedsavers there might not be the biological resources necessary for such a shift. Without the more vocal activist seedsavers and their networks, there would be both fewer seeds and fewer people growing these plants. Without tastemakers like Alice Waters and Chez Panisse, as well as *New York Times* food writers, there would not be the same collective turn to seasonal eating and local ingredients. Perhaps without modernisation and industrial farming there would be less of a collective (or at least an elite) yearning for unusual, unfamiliar, but also 'old', 'heritage' and 'authentic' foods and the public consumption and commodification of such foods.

Unlike the symbolic goods that Max Weber saw being monopolised by certain status groups, an insight carried over into the work of Bourdieu, the heirloom tomato does not lose its earlier availability as it becomes a symbol of elite status and good taste. In other words, in the case of the heirloom tomato, its co-optation by a group of people who earlier would have had nothing to do with it (such as urbanites in New York or San Francisco) does not take the tomatoes out of the hands of the private gardeners who may have harboured heirlooms in their gardens for decades. In fact, by becoming a sign of elite status, the heirloom tomato's accessibility is actually increased rather than decreased (due to seed preservation and the increased availability of seeds and seedlings) and the popularity of heirloom tomatoes in Manhattan restaurants in no way constitutes a monopoly on this status good that keeps it out of the hands of gardeners in rural Kentucky.⁹ Thus the centrality of the spatiality of consumption becomes clear – where an object is consumed matters, and the creation of markets and tastes for such goods has a distinctly spatial aspect. There is no monopoly on heirloom tomatoes and the indications of status that they provide are only relevant in specific spatial settings.

Conclusion

Taste is acquired and it is publicised. The exercise of a taste for heirloom tomatoes happens increasingly in public and commercial venues, but this does not preclude the continuation of its production and consumption in private as well. These cultural practices have broader consequences existing at an intersection of economic and environmental concerns, particularly the economic survival of family farms, the cultivation of biodiversity after a half century of industrial agriculture focused on a

few key hybrids, growing demand for organic produce in industrialised countries and the spread of GMOs, as well as opposition to this expansion. The increased demand changes landscapes and has other material consequences.

These changing tastes have consequences for producers as well. In Chicago, for example, the taste of local restaurant-goers for heirloom tomatoes has spawned an urban farm in Cabrini Green, where a committed urban farmer and activist, Ken Dunn, has begun this project as a part of his decades-long efforts to turn Chicago into a more environmentally sound city. Dunn says of the less than an acre of farm:

'This is not a hobby... This is a real product, and part of that is that it must make money. To make a permanent change in society, it has to function in the existing economy, being able to bring its benefits while paying its bills.' The farm was able to bring in \$45,000 in one year. This, then, is one of the ways that elite tastes for local produce can feed back into an urban ecosystem, creating both greenspace and income in neighborhoods short of both. (Davey 2003)

Thus it can be crucial to pay attention to the uneven landscapes of taste, culture and consumption. There is significant variation in the interaction of tastes and spatial settings. Today heirloom tomatoes and their compatriots in genetic diversity – rare breeds of apples, the little clusters of lamb's lettuce or mâche in plastic tubs sold as 'heirloom lettuce' at expensive markets, not to mention the lumbering bulls and spotted pigs heralded as heirloom livestock – offer insight into a powerful nexus of taste, food, politics, memory and the genetic future. By investigating the origins and implications of this particular way of linking popular understandings of genetics with the consumption of a motley assortment of tomatoes, I find in particular that the study of taste, food and culture can, in some cases, benefit from the systematic inclusion of space (and time) into the analysis.

Notes

- ¹ At the same time, as others have pointed out, in *Distinction* he does not ask about variation over time – how objects move in and out of the taste worlds of particular classes (Holt 1997; Lamont and Lareau 1988).
- ² In addition, as Lamont and Lareau 1988, Bryson 1996, Holt 1997 and others have made clear, taste as an arbiter of distinction appears to operate in more complex and varied ways in the USA than in Bourdieu's original case of France, due both to a long-standing discourse (if not practice) of egalitarianism over elitism, as well as a much less culturally centralised country, characterised by very significant regional variation, as well as the prevalence of cultural omnivorousness (Peterson and Kern 1996).
- ³ Smith (2001) dispels the myth that there was a widespread fear in the USA that tomatoes were poisonous, or rather his careful search of the historical record finds no compelling evidence to support this belief.
- ⁴ The US Department of Agriculture provides further definitions and a detailed history of the growing popularity of heirloom vegetables (DeMuth 1998).
- ⁵ For more on authenticity and the 'return' to heirloom foods, see Tregear (2003, p. 96) who writes, 'Permeating such activities is a concern for *authenticity*: the identification of the quintessential, genuine and 'official' embodiment of the type. Crucially, the key stimulus for both specifications and authenticity can be construed as the development of *markets* for these products.'

- ⁶ See the work of Gary Ibsen (Tomatofest, n.d.) and the tomato festival and seed exchange he has organised.
- ⁷ Part of this interest also seems to emerge in the face of the introduction of genetically modified crops (Finucane and Holup 2005). Opposition to GM crops seems to be on the rise in the USA where 85% of the soybean crop, for example, is genetically modified (Perry and Schultz 2005, p. 160) and is already high in Europe (Finucane and Holup 2005, p. 1606). Leitch points to the anxiety among Europeans surrounding issues of GMOs, the extensive use of antibiotics in livestock, and other perceived threats to the quality and healthfulness of food (Leitch 2003, p. 441).
- ⁸ Tregear (2003, pp. 102–103) also notes: ‘Therefore, the classic Mediterranean concept of typical production as ancient, inherited, collective savoir-faire, whose existence is antithetical to the forces of industrialization, internationalization and free market capitalism, needs to be re-thought. The components of the concept themselves need to be examined in more sophisticated terms, as phenomena moving in symbiosis with changing contexts and forces.’
- ⁹ There are many cases, including in the realm of agriculture and food, where a change in the status and meaning of a particular good does translate into reduced access. In Italy the growing popularity of *lardo di Colonnata* appears to lead to increasingly mechanised production, as well as the imposition of EU regulations forbidding the use of the traditional porous marble curing troughs. On a much broader scale, Kloppenburg (1988, p. xii) charts global changes in the commodification and distribution of seeds, focusing his discussion on the ‘progressive commodification of the seed ... elaboration of a social division of labor between public and private plant breeding, and ... asymmetries in global patterns of seed commerce and exchange between the less developed countries of the South and the advanced industrial nations of the North.’

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