

PREFACE

This project began quite differently from most of my ethnographic work. I was on vacation. It was the summer of 2007, and I was in the midst of fine-tuning the final draft of my last book, a work that looked at popular culture in the tourist town of Arusha, in Tanzania. My wife and I had driven up to Sonoma County from my parents' home in Southern California, and we stayed on the Russian River, which I liked to think of as my regular getaway, or as much of one as it could be for someone who lives 2,900 miles away. I was also enthusiastically anticipating becoming the chair of my department in about a month. All of these circumstances conduced to my pondering what kind of research I might do next. I know—just the kind of guy you want to take on your next vacation. In any case, as I was pretty sure I would not have the opportunity to pop over to Tanzania in the near future, and as my work in Arusha was all but finished, I took a look around in Sonoma. Gravenstein apples in Sebastopol caught my eye. Yeah, I had eaten those as a kid. Now these sweet crisp apples with origins in Denmark were touted as part of Sebastopol's local heritage. Every little town—Forestville, Occidental, Monte Rio, Guerneville—had a string of artisanal food products for sale. Amid the wineries I saw an array of goat farms, some offering pygmy goats for sale as pets and livestock, others raising dairy goats for California *chèvres*.

My interest was piqued, but I was not sure quite what I was looking at. I recall idling about in a bookstore (I believe it was in Calistoga) that had

what seemed like an enormous display of books dedicated to local foods. I skimmed through the most recent issue of *Gastronomica* on its shelves. When I talked to my wife over dinner, I told her that I had an idea for a research project. Taking advantage of her indulgence, I said that there was something called Slow Food, and I thought it could be looked at as a social movement in the United States. Even better, I said we could spend our summers up in Sonoma while I did the research, since the stuff seemed to be everywhere. How hard could that be?

I tucked the thought away for a while. We flew back to our home in North Carolina. I took up my ungodly commute to my newfound administrative tasks at the College of William and Mary, and I thought about those goat farms. One Saturday morning in 2008, I went shopping at the Carrboro Farmers' Market, about a mile and a half from my house. Until that point, although I had lived in the area for five years and had done some shopping at the market, I had not been a regular there; I usually went to the market only for seasonal fruit—strawberries in May, or watermelon in the summer. I certainly did not know any of the vendors by name, or even by sight. On this Saturday, though, it suddenly dawned on me that I really did not need to go anywhere to investigate the questions I had become interested in out in California. Local food, as the term suggests, is everywhere and, as it happens, quite prominently so in North Carolina's Triangle (the area that lies between the three cities of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill), where I lived.

I was enlivened by the prospect of doing this work almost literally in my own backyard, albeit a little wistful that I might not have to go to Sonoma to do it. In looking around the Carrboro Farmers' Market on that fateful Saturday, I also realized something rather obvious: it would not be possible for any one person to study the Slow Food movement, at least not in the ethnographic fashion that is typical of the kind of anthropological research I have usually done. In part as a happy accident of the cultural geography of central North Carolina, I saw a number of vendors offering pork products for sale, and I realized that I might be able to look more closely at pigs and pork as a lens through which to examine the wider questions posed by contemporary efforts to transform American food systems. The fact that pigs are iconic of North Carolina's preferred cuisine made the case for choosing matters porcine even stronger. Moreover, the pig as a culinary form and a lively creature is, as I knew even before I thought of this as research, highly thought of by devotees of Slow Food and high cuisine. "The pig has powerful mojo in the world of cooking," as Sara Dickerman

noted in her essay on the gastronomic lyricism that pigs and pork inspire (2006). Of course any ethnographer worth his Maldon sea salt knows that human-porcine relations are the stuff of legendary anthropological theorizing, from the abominations of Leviticus (Douglas 2012; Soler 1997) to English forms of linguistic abuse (Leach 1964), and from Bakhtinian revels (Stallybrass and White 1986) to Melanesian ritual (Rappaport 1968). All this, coupled with their ironic gustatory appeal to an otherwise nice Jewish boy, made an ethnography focused on the array of values generated by the (re)production, transformation, distribution, and consumption of pigs and their pork seem like just the thing for me to do.

Before I really began my research efforts in earnest, I was struck again with the particularity of the language that I heard and read being used to describe foods, like pigs and pork, by advocates for these innovations in the food system. What made a food local? Could it be just a matter of regulation and certification of the kind carried out by a number of markets—including the Carrboro Farmers' Market—that assured their customers that all of the products purveyed at the market were “local” because they came from less than fifty (or thirty, or a hundred, or however many) miles from the market? Is something local simply by virtue of its proximity in geometric space? Similarly, how did some food become recognized as part of a regional “heritage”? And what made some kinds of foods part of a “foodway,” while others were recognized as “heritage” and still others were noted as “heirloom” varieties? How did some kinds of foods become one thing and not another? The slipperiness and unreliability of these terms is, of course, notorious, as this book demonstrates. It is not always clear whether they are intended to convey information to consumers; certify the presence of some distinctive property in the designated foods; brand the farmer, producer, or purveyor of the product being sold; or purposefully delude potential customers with a marketing ploy. Did this complex lexicon actually index any reliable content?

Moreover, I was especially intrigued by what semioticians would call the iconic function of these terms (Fehérváry 2013; Manning 2012; Munn 1986)—that is, the particular kinds of qualities that are evoked by the use of specific terms. “Heritage,” for example, is a particularly complex term to use, perhaps especially with respect to food. In a few instances it might be the product of a certification process that labels foods meeting specific criteria that have been agreed on, either by experts in a particular field (for example, by animal scientists trying to protect the biological profile of a particular “heritage” breed) or by producers who want to regulate their

markets so as to create premium value for their “heritage” good. Just as often it is simply a term that is used willy-nilly to suggest quality to potential consumers.

But why—and how—does “heritage” suggest quality? It implies a certain temporal depth to a product, one that suggests a legacy of usage or production over many generations (but how many? and where?). Even advocates for Slow Food in the United States recognize that “heritage” means something very different in Europe, where Slow Food began, than it does in the United States (Petrini 2006). While European producers often seek protection for products and practices that are held to have a long, recognized legacy in a particular region, most American farmers and artisans are less committed to this notion of “heritage” (Paxson 2012). Nonetheless, “heritage” flourishes as a term in the production or sale of particular foods in the United States. What can it mean, for example, that an apple like the Gravenstein, which is known to come from South Jutland in Denmark, could be declared a heritage variety in Sonoma County and be included in the U.S. Slow Food’s “Ark of Taste” (Local Harvest n.d.)? Or that pigs celebrated as descendants of Spanish black foot pigs could be registered as an American heritage breed in North and South Carolina (and, indeed, across the country)?

In the course of this book I directly examine such questions and show how complicated it is to make such deceptively complicated descriptions.¹ But I also note that it is possible to speak of “heritage,” even in the absence of any real generational depth—and even when producers and consumers do not assume any such depth—because the word can also connote more general qualities of depth. Indeed, a central quality of the foods that are described as “heritage” is the way they are felt to embody deeper meanings or characteristics. Such depth may be attributes of their process of production or flavor. In this way, depth of meaning can be contrasted to other qualities—like being cheap, insipid, bland, or commercial—and thereby can represent foods described in this way as being opposed to, or distinct from, the generic products of an industrial food system. In this book I illustrate the ways that this oppositional possibility instantiates a critical contrast between the compromised values of our current food system and what is often thought of (simply, if quite confusingly!) as “real” food.² Heritage connotes generational, historical, grounded depth (and it is only one among many signifiers held to instantiate these qualities in the food world), which I argue is reliably embodied in something otherwise notoriously hard to know: the real thing.

This elusive but compelling truth, the real thing, is a powerful motivation for the complex and challenging efforts I have seen made by farmers, chefs, consultants, and ordinary eaters who are aiming to transform the industrial food system or some specific dimension of it. This is not only a question of finding the real stuff, not just a matter of seeking and spending and getting, but also of knowing what it is. Perhaps above all it is a commitment to the notion that the real is a veritable entity, something that can be brought into being, made concrete, and accessible in everyday life. While figuring out what people can possibly mean by “the real”—or even by “real food”—is undoubtedly a messy task and full of ambiguity, these commitments to the real, as well as the capacity to discern it and the wherewithal to acquire it, are not only abstract, metaphysical matters. The guiding problem I discuss in this book is, in fact, trying to understand and demonstrate how real pigs come to embody these material and symbolic characteristics. Finding and making such pigs, lively animals that incarnate quality, is a project with sociocultural as well as political economic dimensions. The book before you is my attempt to flesh out the endeavors of those working to bring us real pigs.