

Travelling Noodles and Migrating Pieces of Raw Fish: How Food Moves — and How It Moves Us

THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC HAS confined many middle-class eaters to a much smaller geographic range than they are typically accustomed. Unable to easily cross borders, eaters have looked around their homes, neighborhoods, and cities for affordable meals and sources of novelty and entertainment. People also rummaged around their kitchens looking for comfort, pleasure, and stress relief. The now-cliché image is of a lethargic urbanite burrowing down in their kitchen to ferment sourdough, bake banana bread, whip up a dalgona coffee, or maybe sprout green onions in a jar on their windowsill. At many times in the pandemic lockdown, I certainly resembled this cliché, sprouting sprouts and baking so much banana bread that my kids are now totally indifferent to its charms—even with chocolate chips. The pandemic slowed many people down, particularly privileged people who see global mobility as their birthright, and food was a way of coping with feeling stuck in place.

The stories in this issue of *Gastronomica* teach us—or simply remind us—that even when we stay still, food is always on the move. At a biophysical level, food rambles unapologetically in and out of our bodies. More expansively, food migrates across borders, carrying with it the material legacy of its production process, but also smuggling in a diverse kit of cultural messages and ideologies. Many eaters like to think of themselves as sovereign consumers who are completely in control of their food decisions. Food scholarship reminds us how food *shapes us* as it moves, modulating our palates, altering our gut biomes, shifting our ideas of comfort eating, and changing what's on the dinner table at the local and national levels. The stories in this issue tell us of the power of food to move—and to move us in the process.

Food's mobility is certainly not a new lesson for food scholars. When we teach food studies to undergraduate students, many of us include some mention of the storied geographic pathways of beloved foods like chocolate and tomatoes. These foods migrated alongside pathways of European empire and colonization, moving from Mesoamerica to colonial European palaces, eventually finding their way into many “comfort food” repertoires (think here of pizza, chocolate cake, and butter chicken). The wheat plant first domesticated in Southwest Asia crossed the ocean to become a monocultural mainstay on the Canadian prairies (grown by people like

my grandfather and uncles) and is now responsible for a remarkable one out of five calories consumed on the planet (see André Magnan's review of Catherine Zabinski's *Amber Waves* in this issue). Food moves us emotionally but also shifts entire political ecologies and economies, transforming grassland polycultures to wheat-based monocultures, altering national ideals of a "good" diet to increasingly include bread and noodles, and giving rise to new fortunes and new hungers.

Yes, we *know* that food moves. What we don't always know, or may severely underestimate, is how this mobility generates surprises and contradictions in the foodscape. The materiality and cultural meanings of food's mobility continue to evolve, mutate, and even astonish. Food's globetrotting ways are not entirely predictable, nor are they preordained. As foods flow, powerful economic actors must actively work to manage material flows, mitigate risk, and create a class of stable consumers. In this issue, Joe Clifford's article "The Nation and the Noodle" reveals the transnational contradictions embedded in Indomie, Indonesia's largest instant noodle brand. One contradiction immediately jumps out: Indonesia is a country with close cultural connections to rice as a national staple, but we learn how Indonesia is now the second largest consumer of instant noodles in the world. Clifford identifies a surprising feature of the transnational noodle in a country with "strong nationalist food security laws that are tied to a wider economic nationalism": Indomie noodles have emerged as a national cultural icon at the same time their production is heavily reliant on imports of Australian wheat. Indonesian wheat growers feel relatively unprotected from imports, yet Indomie marketing is deeply rooted in nationalist imaginaries and its noodle flavors are linked to popular Indonesian dishes (e.g., mie goreng). While we might associate gastronationalism with artisanal, place-specific foods like Italian prosciutto di Parma or French foie-gras (DeSoucey 2016), Clifford shows how a mass-manufactured food (using imported wheat) fuels a "soft gastronationalism" that effectively creates a sense of collective solidarity around Indonesian identity.

These connections and surprises of a transnational noodle brand came to the fore in a recent food studies class I taught. An Indonesian student made a presentation where she suggested that Indomie was an integral part of her national identity. Several West African students were surprised at this assertion; Indomie noodles had always seemed as though they belonged to them, and they thought of it as a quintessential food connected to their own home and food memories. Several Middle Eastern students joined the discussion, remarking that they too had thought of Indomie noodles as part of their own regional foodscape and personal food memories. The Indonesian student ended her presentation with a call for noodle-based unity, declaring "despite our geographic differences, we can all agree that Indomie is good." This geographically diverse group of students shared a collective sense of Indomie noodles being linked emotionally to their positive food memories, even though these memories were rooted in extremely diverse upbringings. This feeling of collective solidarity around Indomie felt affirming to the students, and was lovely to observe, especially in an online class when connections are hard to foster. What the students also shared was a material connection through their participation in a dried noodle economy linked to a transnational conglomerate, Indofood. As Clifford's article notes, Indomie is owned by the Salim Group, Indonesia's largest conglomerate. This firm has connections to controversial palm oil plantation expansion and deforestation, as well as historic ties to former Indonesian dictator Suharto. The global movement of noodles—and wheat—involves positive emotional memories as well as historically rooted power inequities with ties to ongoing environmental crises.

Part of the intellectual leverage (and joy!) of teaching and studying food lies in its ability to generate surprises and paradoxes (Guptill, Copelton, and Lucal 2017), like the ones that emerge around Indomie. These exist alongside *through lines*—threads of continuity that can be used to pull together our observations and make connections across diverse foods and faraway places. As I reflect on the articles in this issue, as well as recent iterations of food scholarship, three issues surface as particularly significant when it comes to identifying through lines and moments of surprise, contestation, and dynamism: (1) *power*: struggles over food as a mobile and vital capitalist commodity; (2) *authenticity*: who confers culinary legitimacy?; and (3) *emotion*: food's ability to move us as it moves across borders.

Power: Struggles over Food as a “Vital” Commodity

The dominant global marketplace frames food as a commodity, not a human right. This framing has powerful implications for who eats, what is eaten, and who faces hunger and food insecurity. (This point is powerfully made in two book reviews in this issue: Johanna Wilkes's review of Mark Bittman's *Animal, Vegetable, Junk* and Benjamin Siegel's review of Tom Scott-Smith's *On an Empty Stomach*.) This may seem painfully obvious, but it remains essential to recognize that food operates as a globalized capitalist commodity, deeply enmeshed in powerful webs of corporate concentration (Howard 2021). At the same time, it seems important to avoid a heavy-handed, top-down, deterministic perspective that sees food *only* through a predictable, ordered flow of capitalist commodification. That interpretation not only feels deadening and stale but leaves us vulnerable to the critical question, “if you already knew what you were going to find, why did you bother doing the research?”

Whether we are thinking about a package of dried noodles or a bag of flour, food is not simply a passive object, or an inert, dead widget that moves through global commodity chains. An alternative approach is to think of food as having a “vital” quality, a term taken from Jane Bennett's theory of “vital materialism” (2010). Bennett's analysis suggests that food—as well as all the other matter of modern life—is vital, meaning it has the capacity to “impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (2010: viii). Appreciating vitality allows us to see food's agentic potential to shape and mold us as it moves through our bodies and through the foodscape. We see food's dynamism but also recognize that food, as a vital substance, is not always predictable—even in a capitalist system dominated by powerful corporate actors with the consistent goal of profit maximization. Crops are destroyed by extreme weather, popular foods like bananas are threatened by fungus and disease, new products flop, and once-popular foods and cuisines fall out of fashion. Cherished dishes shift and change along with ecosystem changes, as seen in this issue in Diana Bocarejo and Rafael Diaz's review of the rural Colombian fish dish *el viudo de pescado*. Colombian rural communities see the “living water” as a key element of the dish, which means that *viudo* now embodies “both living and sick waters” that have been impacted by oil spills, hydroelectric plants, agricultural pollution, and urban wastewater. By appreciating the vitality of *viudo*, we can better understand how protecting it is an issue of culinary heritage as well as environmental justice.

To be clear, thinking about foods and dishes, like *viudo*, as a “vital” force with a kind of agency does not negate food's commodity status. Nor does this recognition

erase the legacy of Eurocentric food imperialism, or the racialized and class logics of our foodscapes. This is not an invitation to fetishize resistance and ignore *power*—an analytic through line that remains essential. What I think a conceptualization of food as vital *can* do is sensitize us to the complexity and unpredictability of food’s movement across spatial and sociodemographic borders. Capitalist logics entrench a ruthless process of monopolization and concentration of resources, but flows of food, capital, and culture are not always unidirectional, predictable, or completely controlled by corporate actors.

Consider how food flows through a neocolonial, capitalist world system. Even though Western cultural imperialism persists, food commodities and food culture also flow from the global south to the global north; food and culture also circulate *within* regions. Just as Korean pop culture flows beyond national borders (Chua and Iwabuchi 2008; Menon 2019), Canadian consumers may find themselves purchasing dalgona candy or ordering fried chicken from the Filipino chain Jollibee. Japanese chefs may prioritize the purchase of a pizza oven for their “hyperlocal” restaurant, or so argues Samuel Yamashita in his article on the quest for a hyperlocal restaurant (which was crafted in response to the spring 2021 piece in *Gastronomica* by John Broadway on restaurant politics). As Krystyn R. Moon, Jennifer Rhode Ward, José Vazquez Rodriguez, and Jorge Foyo investigated in their study, rural Cubans may consume spaghetti and pizza as junk food. Such consumption demonstrates that Western taste and culinary standards remain imbued with power, capital, and colonial legacies, but their legacies are not necessarily straightforward. Indeed, they are often resisted and even disdained—like the spaghetti and pizza eaten in rural Cuba. As explored in the previous issue of *Gastronomica*, a Thai street vendor may find the awarding of a Michelin star to be a burden rather than a blessing and ask to be removed from the celebrated French ranking system (Matta and Panchapakesan 2021). Pushback is not only found in isolated cases but can be organized collectively, as seen in food justice organizing in the United States or in *La Via Campesina*, a global peasant-rights organization demanding that food be treated as a sovereign right outside the commodity system (Sbicca 2018; Desmarais 2006). In Canada, organizations from various parts of the country are mobilizing to address food insecurity and demand a more comprehensive, socially just vision of food security, as detailed in an article in this issue by Kimberly Hill-Tout, Claudia Hirtenfelder, Kiera E. B. McMaster and Megan Herod. All these examples remind food scholars of the importance of remaining attentive to colonial legacies and capitalist exploitation, while simultaneously examining counter-hegemonic instances of cultural and culinary pushback. These examples also remind us of food’s vitality: its ability to shift and shape us as we labor to feed ourselves in just and dignified ways.

Authenticity: Is This Sushi Authentic?

When food travels across boundaries, it tends to raise questions about its authenticity. Is this *authentic* sushi? Can *authentic* pizza come from an imported pizza oven in Japan? Is this real-deal dalgona candy imported from Korea? In Satomi Fukutomi’s article in this issue on sushi culture in Perth, Australia, she observes that only non-Japanese people are overly concerned with the authenticity of the Japanese dishes they are eating. In contrast, a Japanese food vendor she interviews at the local farmers market likes to experiment, to “think outside the box” and come up with new dishes.

The (non-Japanese) Australian consumers understand Japanese food as “authentic” when it is “simple,” connected to Japanese chefs (not Korean or Chinese or white chefs), or part of a dish or food tradition that they think is “real” in Japan. Not only are consumers’ understandings of “real,” authentic Japanese food often partial (e.g., how do they know if the chef is really Japanese?), but paradoxically, Perth eaters also commonly accept and enthusiastically enjoy obviously non-authentic versions of Japanese food, such as teriyaki sauce on chicken gyoza, supermarket sushi rolls, salad bowls with kale and edamame, or udon noodles swimming in miso soup (these are all foods that Fukutomi tells us are not commonly consumed in Japan). Fukutomi concludes that Australian consumers conjure their own ideas of what “authentic” Japanese food is through their food practices—eating out, reviewing restaurants online, snacking on sushi rolls, and remembering (or fantasizing about) life in Japan.

As foods like sushi move around the world, conceptualizations of authenticity evolve alongside them, and Fukutomi’s article reminds us that authenticity proves to be as mobile and shapeshifting as food itself. Cultural sociologists would not be surprised by this development, as they understand authenticity as part of the long-standing human tendency to “invent” tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Peterson and Anand refer to authenticity as a “renewable resource” (2004: 326), which is a useful conceptualization for food scholars to help us understand and appreciate authenticity’s fluid character. As a renewable resource, the capacity for inventing culinary authenticity seems almost limitless. However, I would propose that some through lines can be observed. Authenticity, like nationalism, is a tradition that can be invented and re-invented endlessly, but certain patterns are persistent.

Most significantly, the process of determining the authenticity of a dish or a cuisine continues to be strongly linked to the decision making and consecration of powerful actors. This is not to deny that the legitimacy of powerful culinary voices has been de-centered by the emergence of new culinary voices adjudicating on social media. The rise of foodie culture, social media, and online food reviews creates a certain potential for openness beyond traditional culinary hierarchies. Discussing the hyperlocal cuisine found at Yoshihiro Imai’s restaurant monk, Samuel Yamashita concludes that the Japanese restaurant, which is strongly rooted in local foodscapes, “satisfies the last feature of my ideal restaurant—its democracy.” This is an exciting conclusion to read, and certainly whets the appetite for imagining all the good foods produced in Imai’s wood-fired pizza oven. Seeing the word “democracy” in a restaurant review might seem odd, but it is not a total surprise. I have argued elsewhere that democratization is one key pole that characterizes gourmet foodscapes and can be seen in the impulse to valorize “authentic” foods that are outside the French culinary canon, and push back against the hierarchical, snobbish, and classist assumptions of classic gastronomy (Johnston and Baumann 2015). At the same time, the democratic impulse exists in dialectic tension with a persistent contrasting pole: distinction. Established food hierarchies may open their doors to chefs, foods, and cuisines outside a French (or Eurocentric) canon, but status signaling and distinction processes persist. These hierarchies are linked to cultural, material, and racial privilege in local, national, and transnational food scenes.

Traditional gatekeepers retain an immense amount of power to determine what “good” food is and what “authentic” food is. Yes, times have changed, and determining what foods are valued and authentic is not simply tied to a single actor, like the pronouncements of a *New York Times* food review. Many eaters learned much more about “good” food from Anthony Bourdain’s charismatic television presence than they did from reading the Michelin guide. (See Signe Rousseau’s review of

Roadrunner: A Film about Anthony Bourdain). Culinary hierarchies are more complicated now than in the past, but that doesn't mean that they don't exist.

There is ample evidence that powerful new culinary intermediaries have emerged to call out food trends, designate culinary genius, and determine authenticity. Global food culture is dominated by relatively powerful actors (e.g., Netflix's role in making food documentaries), and the pathways to becoming an influential cultural or culinary mediator are stratified by class, race, ethnicity, gender, and Eurocentricity (Erigha 2021; Gvion 2018; Johnston, Rodney, and Chong 2014; Ocejo 2017; Smith Maguire 2018). Not all authentic foods are equally fashionable or saleable. Drawing lines around authenticity is a project that intersects with cultural mediators, state regulators, as well as local and global market forces that paradoxically offer opportunities for preservation and cultural regeneration (MacDonald 2013). In this issue, Sara El-Sayed and Christy Spackman's provocatively titled article "Follow the Ferments" examines how transnationally diverse cultures of fermented foods are regulated in Arizona. The authors follow two specific foods—the Nepali fermented greens dish called gundruk and Middle Eastern fermented dairy products. They find that the food system regulatory apparatus is designed for big players, and that opportunities are limited for smaller-scale food producers to commoditize authenticity, which has "contributed to the loss of traditional foods and production practices." Paradoxically, the limited potential of commoditization has threatened the viability of fermented foods such as gundruk. Not only is this a loss for our collective microbiome, but El-Sayed and Spackman also argue that this limits progress toward a more inclusive, just, and flavorful food culture.

The stratification of opportunities to marketize and benefit from authenticity can persist even alongside a cultural ideology valuing culinary opening or democratization. One powerful instance of this tendency was provided by Sharon Zukin and colleagues (2017), who carried out a framing analysis of Yelp reviews in two Brooklyn neighborhoods that featured predominantly white (Polish ancestry) and Black populations. Their study identified a process of "discursive redlining," whereby consumers were more likely to deem the white neighborhood as "authentic" or "cozy," invoking a nostalgic view of a neighborhood worth preserving; at the same time, the Black neighborhood tended to be depicted in racialized terms that reaffirmed Black foods as less valuable and Black neighborhoods as dirty, sketchy, dangerous, and in need of a culinary transformation via gentrification (Zukin, Lindeman, and Hurson 2017). This study teaches us how a relatively open field of culinary gatekeepers on Yelp can reproduce institutionalized racism. It also helps us understand how seemingly innocent, democratic preferences for authentic foods and restaurants can culturally reinforce an urban gentrification process that may feature exciting new tastes for privileged diners alongside urban processes of cultural marginalization, high rents, and geographic displacement for long-time residents (Alkon, Kato, and Sbicca 2021). (See Tiana Bakić Hayden's review of Andrew Deener's book *The Problem with Feeding Cities*, as well as the roundtable, facilitated by Michael Chrobok and myself, with Alison Hope Alkon, Yuki Kato, and Joshua Sbicca to discuss their book, *A Recipe for Gentrification*.)

Emotion: Food Motivates Us and Moves Us

Connecting food with the body and emotion is a significant third through line. While certainly not a new observation (Lupton 1998), it remains a promising line of food

inquiry. The influential emotions researcher Arlie Hochschild argues that bringing emotion into scholarship involves appreciating “all that becomes apparent when we make the simple assumption that *what we feel* is fully as important to the outcome of social affairs as *what we think or do*” (1990: 117, emphasis mine). Put in food terms, we must understand *what* we eat, what we *think* about food, and how we *feel* about what we eat (and don’t eat). The feeling eater must be an integral part of our studies. Eating is a fundamentally emotional act that works not only to shape our sense of self but also to shape collective emotions relating to group belonging and solidarity. At the same time, emotion is also a key part of how we experience the disquiet and distress relating to food problems ranging from food insecurity and climate change to eating disorders.

Unfortunately, linking food with embodied sensations and emotions has been a significant part of why food studies has been historically relegated to a silo of “not serious,” not rational, and not important. Think home economics versus “real” economics. As Warren Belasco writes in his eminently useful teaching text, *Food: The Key Concepts*, food scholars are “heir to a classic dualism that prizes mind over body” (2008: 2). This dualism continues to persist in the long-standing, pervasive tendency to bifurcate studies of food production and consumption. While emotional content is less commonly found within food production scholarship, studies of food consumption are well aware of the emotional dimensions of food, and new scholarship not only includes emotion but *showcases* the important ways that food and emotions intermingle (MacKendrick and Pristavec 2019).

As a sociologist working within a discipline that often ties its status to its proximity to the natural sciences, I must give credit where credit is due: humanities scholars are often more open to explore the emotionality of food through historical explorations, philosophical interventions, and creative forms of art, writing, and analysis. A significant part of the joy of being involved with an interdisciplinary endeavor like *Gastronomica* is its consistent desire to include a wide swath of food scholarly interventions, including rigorously empirical social science projects as well as artistic endeavors and creative nonfiction. Nancy Gagliardi’s visual contribution to this issue, “Does This Make Me Look Fat?,” plays with the idea of the idealized feminine figure and speaks to the amazingly persistent problem of gendered body discipline. Eric Himmelfarb’s review of Adrienne Su’s poetry collection *Peach State* reminded me—a literal thinking sociologist—of the power of figurative language to capture our complex relationships with food and place. Corrine Collins’s essay on Jamaican black cake and Sandra Trujillo’s essay “Lola’s Good Corn” both speak powerfully to the emotional pull of family foodwork, as well as the sensorial elements of food. This is writing that speaks to intimate interweaving of food and emotion, while also making us, as readers, *feel* hungry to taste these dishes. In “Table for One,” Michael DiMartino writes an evocative piece on working through the emotional discomfort of eating alone in a restaurant and might also encourage you to “try this at home.” I would also draw your attention to Anelyse M. Weiler’s photo essay, which features visual images from the burning forests and food-producing regions of British Columbia, an area where she has roots as an environmental sociologist, labor scholar, and activist committed to improving the lives of migrant farm workers in Canada. The emotional resonance of Weiler’s images comes not only from Weiler’s commitment to food scholarship but from her emotional connection to a forest ecosystem and foodscape threatened by climate change. Thinking about these images in the context of Weiler’s scholarship on farm workers (Weiler 2021; Weiler and McLaughlin 2019), we can begin to imagine the joys and hardships facing migrant farmworkers in Canada who endure long

absences from their families and increasingly work in smoke-filled conditions that threaten their health and well-being.

Food's emotional dimension is linked to macro events like an existential climate crisis, but it is also rooted in the banality of everyday foodwork and eating habits. Feminist scholarship on domestic foodwork has made important connections between food and emotions, as successful instantiations of foodwork are deeply connected to socially validated femininities and can generate intense feelings of pride and satisfaction, as well as shame and embarrassment (DeVault 1991; Cairns and Johnston 2015; Bowen, Brenton, and Elliot 2019). Successfully managing food and the body—especially given the paradoxical neoliberal imperative to consume more with the disciplinary imperative to manage and minimize body fat—is emotionally fraught terrain (Guthman 2011). Unpacking the pleasure and fear around food, especially given the widespread social context of systemic obesophobia, remains an important topic for scholars studying food and emotion. Kathleen LeBesco's own writing (2003) is a formative contribution to this area, and here she provides a review of Regina Hofer's imaginative graphic novel, *FAT*, which reflects on the relationships between dysfunctional family, art, and her struggles with anorexia and bulimia.

While food scholars have examined food in relation to bodies and maternal foodwork, less work has examined the emotional content of food media. New work in this direction is an important turn since food media is heavily infiltrated with emotional discourse. As anybody who has watched a cooking competition knows, these events often feature emotional displays that range from angry outbursts to tears to heartfelt moments of pride. Good food is expected to move the eater—and the viewer. Grosalik and Lerner (2020) use the television franchise “MasterChef” to develop the concept of “gastro-emotivism,” a helpful term that suggests that gastronomy involves emotional processes that inflect individual psychological struggles as well as collective identities. Just as food moves around the world, so do the emotional frameworks of food media empires. A common phrase Grosalik and Lerner hear uttered by “MasterChef” judges is, “There is something about your food that moves me,” but they also note how the franchise moves participants and viewers in varied ways. While the American and Israeli versions of “MasterChef” both feature high degrees of emotionality, the British, New Zealand, and Australian versions have fewer physical displays of emotion (e.g., hugging) and instead signal emotions through talking. Crying is commonplace in “MasterChef Israel,” but in the Korean and Russian versions crying is rare and even shameful. Looking at “MasterChef Israel,” they find that emotional discourse works on an individual level to produce an authentic reflection of the self, but it also works collectively to draw symbolic boundaries around belonging in the Israeli nation.

The concept of gastro-emotivism prompts us to consider the contemporary foodscape not as a pure realm of reason and rationality but as a deeply emotional space. This goes against the stereotypical assumption of advanced capitalism as a robotic, rational landscape of soulless Soylent drinkers. Indeed, Eva Illouz (2017) theorizes that late capitalism involves a process of emotional *intensification* related to the development of an authentic self, and she develops the concept of “emodities” to capture how emotions and commodities are co-produced. This has important implications for food scholarship. As we seek to better understand how commodification processes involve the exploitation of natural resources and labor, we can also pay closer attention to how the emotional qualities of food are an integral part of the commodification process—and a key part of struggles to *resist* commodification.

Appreciating gastro-emotivism is a way of appreciating, for example, how the pressures of family foodwork are about managing children's caloric and nutrient intakes and also about managing the emotions of parents and children. MacKendrick and Pristavec (2019) write of maternal foodwork in a quote that reflects maternal food pressures but also speaks to the collective emotional work surrounding food decisions in uncertain times:

Mothers worried that they would transfer their anxiety about the industrial food system onto their children, and alienate friends, fellow parents, and relatives who are part of their everyday food routines. Navigating the tension between “careful” and “crazy” required subtle but significant emotion work. (453)

Indeed, as we struggle ourselves to make and eat good food, understand battles over food's authenticity, and feel moved by the foods moving around us, we too may feel as if we are walking an emotional tightrope between “careful” and “crazy.” The challenge facing food scholars — as well as eaters and food producers — is to find a degree of sanity based on a *careful* and mindful engagement with food that also allows in flickers of “crazy.” By “crazy” I mean the rage, sorrow, and anguish that comes with opening our minds and emotions to the big-picture worries, injustice, and tragedies of a food system that fails so many and yet provides spectacular meals for the few.

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