

WHAT MAKES FOOD “LOCAL”? And why does “the local” matter when we speak of food? These are questions that vex scholars, farmers, activists, commercial food producers, and ordinary people alike. Desires to protect “local” cultures and unique traditions against globalization, to call attention to the particular landscapes and communities in which food production and consumption occur, or to recognize and experience a unique flavor palate believed to emanate from a specific locale are all embedded within concerns that “the local” is a place that exists and that informs the values and qualities attached to food.

Yet questions about “the local” extend beyond merely identifying what and where it might exist, and engage larger issues about the senses, identity, ethics and morality, power, and even performance, as well as fundamental questions about the very nature of food itself. As a result, whether food qualifies as “local” becomes an inquiry into what the project of making food “local” can tell us about how communities organize and define themselves, the ideals they promote, the challenges they face, how they define what counts as “food” or not, and their relationships to the larger geopolitical spheres they inhabit. In many respects, “the local” is not so much a location as it is a lens that reflects and refracts many other topics.

In different ways, the pieces in this issue of *Gastronomica* coalesce around themes of “localness,” how “the local” is made visible, real, and even tangible in multiple ways and at multiple scales. These conversations illuminate the many different communities and cultures that can achieve status as “local” and come to represent “local” interests. In the opening article, Toni Risson examines the movement of Greek food cultures to Australia and the important contributions of Greek food purveyors and food rituals not just to the Greek diaspora but also to Australian cultural institutions themselves. Tracey Heatherington takes up this theme of foodscapes through a cultural ecology approach that attends to the sensory dimensions of the landscapes that produce particular cultures, foods, and food traditions.

In her article, Joanne Finkelstein continues this critical examination of the role of the senses through a philosophical musing on theories of taste within a cultural context of excess. Taking a slightly different angle, Alison Hope Alkon moves from the philosophical to the explicitly political by exploring how American food justice movements, especially those that are focused on local issues and arise from community-led efforts, shed light on larger political and economic forces such as neoliberal capitalism. Underlying these efforts to transform food practices are modes of performance and enactment, a theme that Kevin Landis discusses in his article on the place of food in theater.

Corollary themes of heritage, community, and politics emerge in the other articles in this issue, which all raise thoughtful questions about the origin myths that are

associated with foods and food practices. Collectively, these articles demonstrate that “local” is a relative location, as “local” foods may originate from nature, particular regional landscapes, historical artisanal practices, small-scale family and community networks, or even highly scientific and technological laboratories and inventions. In her essay about the recent turn to home butchery in the United States, Jessica Martell considers the intersection of performance, ethics, and the desire to return to a natural state of human-animal existence. Isobel Grad also probes the relationship between culinary heritage, regional landscapes, and animals in her essay on the significance of sheep in Icelandic foodways. Picking up on the underlying themes of nostalgia in these pieces, Stacy Adimando provocatively considers what, precisely, gets lost as food traditions change over time.

In contrast, both Cara Eisenpress and Andrew Simmons explore how new traditions are made and how they contribute to idealized forms of local community. For Simmons, the issue is how teenagers at a California high school created an alternative informal food system and capitalist economy that subverted and bypassed the formal food economy of their school. At a much larger scale, Eisenpress’s essay on the military food industry that feeds American soldiers, and eventually American citizens, presents a detailed inside glimpse into the scientific laboratories and government meeting rooms that produce and nourish an idealized citizen. Finally, Omar Lopez presents a provocative thought-piece on how new technologies challenge not just how we understand the origins of food but also the very nature of what counts as “food.”

In the end, questions about the nature of “the local” challenge us to rethink the spaces, scales, and temporalities associated with food and food traditions. From its origins through its uses and on to its disposal, food is always on the move, both as an object and an ideal. And perhaps it is that dynamic, mobile, malleable quality of food – its ability to move across and transcend boundaries and expectations – that makes it so valuable for understanding the nature of the “local” itself.



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