Re-examining the Contested Good: Proceedings from a Postgraduate Workshop on Good Food

Abstract: Following the 2017 postgraduate research workshop hosted by the SOAS Food Studies Centre, in collaboration with University of Warwick Food GRP, this article brings together nine research briefs written by various participants. Inspired by the workshop’s provocative theme, “What Is Good Food?”, each author explores how food categories are shaped and negotiated in different contexts and across scales. In this multi-authored article, the question of “good” food is first presented as contingent upon nutritional, economic, political, ritual, or moral conditions. Each author then reveals how globally defined notions of food’s goodness are often resisted on the ground by producers and consumers, beyond the notions of ethics or “alternative” food movements that have often been the emphasis of previous literature dealing with the topic of good food. Taken together, this article scrutinizes the effects of various hierarchies of power and invites readers to reassess why and how good food continues to be a contested category.

Keywords: “good” food, spatiality, morality, identity, power

Each of our stories intersects in the re-examination of the contested nature of good food. Analyzing this concept in a broad variety of global contexts offers an insight into how “global” discourses (around concerns such as nutrition or obesity) interact with more situated concerns. These more emplaced considerations produce very different understandings of what might make a food good (or bad!). Rather than seeing this as a local/global or alternative/conventional dichotomy, we think the attention to good food affords a fascinating opportunity to pull apart and analyze the relationship between these different frames, which are interlinked and complex. In this context, our collection shows how some notions of good food are challenged and even resisted in response to what are perhaps too many and much too fluid ideas of “goodness.”

Especially in the last ten years, the question of what good food is and how notions of goodness are negotiated has occupied food scholars from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Possibly the most unifying feature of these perspectives is the focus on the multiple and often competing moralities that are underlying creations and negotiations of understandings of good food (see e.g. Andersen 2011; Guthman 2008; Wilkerson 2016), emphasizing that a more single-minded focus on individual choice is limiting at best and discriminating at worst. It is thus not surprising that questions of what counts...
as good food are often tethered to debates about health and nutrition.

A recent special issue on Critical Nutrition published in this journal (Guthman 2014) debates whether classic nutritional science adequately defines good food, only to conclude that in a world where “expertise” is sought from a wide and contentious variety of sources, the only thing we can be sure of is that a confusing number of actors consider themselves authorities in this discourse. Rather than solving the problem of defining “healthy” or “nutritious” food, it is argued, this increased public, as well as lay and scholarly, interest may actually exacerbate the problem, reinforcing anxieties about what good and bad food is (see also Bileckoff 2013; Bobrow-Strain 2012). While Guthman (2014) proposes to defamiliarize nutrition to overcome this confusing cacophony, other food scholars suggest a return to food’s materiality, to treat food as food, embedded in sensory experiences of taste (e.g., Abbots 2014; Mol 2009).

Grasseni and Paxson (2014), in their proposal to reconceptualize the debate through the “reinvention of food,” go beyond mortality, health, nutrition, and taste as markers of good food. The authors in their collection address how food is being rediscovered and renewed, giving new form and significance to food substances, senses, and practices, and propose an attention to issues of affordability, accessibility, and familiarity as equally important markers of good food. The food they describe is good not only in multifaceted and highly politicized ways: its goodness also emerges in relations between feeders and eaters, and is always embedded in specific contexts of production and consumption that partially determine choices.

This shift in focus requires considering not only the political economy of a given food and food system, but also acknowledging the multispecies “ecologies of production” (Paxson 2013) that any food is inevitably a result of.

In this sense, the articles in Grasseni and Paxson come closest to what we are concerned with in this piece. Yet, our collection proposes to probe further and explore the effects of hierarchies of power in determining what good food is. Our cases differ from the authors concerned with the reinvention of (good) food, whose field sites and actors engage with alternative food movements that define themselves largely in opposition to more conventional forms of food production, distribution, and consumption.

With one contrasting exception (Larmer), we approach the question of good food from the perspective of actors who do not identify with any form of alternative or activist movement. For most of our interlocutors, alternative and conventional, or local and global, notions of good food have to coexist and are negotiated on a regular basis. This raises interesting questions such as, What happens when different regimes of good food meet? Who has the power to determine what is considered good food and how? Are people and foods left behind? Are tastes diluted? Do variegated notions of good food become indistinguishable?

As this short review of recent literature already suggests, there is little consensus in the academy about definitions of good food, even while good foods have been successfully adapted to postmodern sentiments and global markets. Simultaneously, local actors appear to have a clear idea of what good food is, or at least act every day to produce and eat good food, despite the confusion. Yet, this multiplicity of good is also problematic. As shown through each of our case studies, not all good is acceptable to, or accepted by, the actors presented here, not least because there might be too many definitions of good coexisting at once, both on micro and macro scales. Although the many interlocutors portrayed below are always reinventing and critically redefining what good food means, we equally want to emphasize their resistance to especially proliferating, and often distancing, notions of goodness to address what is amiss in much current debate: the effects of standardizing or commodifying food, which inevitably attempt to quantify food’s value.

In this multi-authored piece, we seek to highlight how globally defined notions of food’s goodness are often resisted on the ground by producers and consumers, especially because they are often also spatially or temporally distant. Not surprisingly, these processes are at times contradictory, at times ambivalent, and certainly always messy, even violent. In their ethnographic accounts from Istria and Morocco, Anna Colquhoun and Katharina Graf respectively show that distinct notions of what is good food exist on a decidedly local level, which often seem at odds with broader conceptualizations of good food. There is also a mismatch between goodness and profit-making in many of these cases; in Istria, the taste of ox meat is deemed inferior by some when it is (more “industrially”) produced for a tourist-oriented market, and (cheaper industrially produced) store-bought bread in Morocco loses much of its cultural value.

Similarly, in Camelia Dewan’s ethnographic research in Bangladesh, not only does “modern,” capital-intensive, high-yielding rice grown using synthetic agrochemicals have poor taste, its purity and nutritional value are also deemed tainted by her interlocutors. The mismatch between food production and ecology corrupts food’s goodness in the search for profit, which is seen by some to ultimately result in weak humans, with questionable morality and poor health.

By contrast, Megan Larmer’s ethnography shows how people working at an agricultural nonprofit in the state of New
York challenge North American meat industry paradigms by drawing attention to the ethical and ecological benefits of regional, pasture-based livestock. The impossibility remains, however, of this meat competing on price with meat produced to the profit-driven standards of the global market. Mehroosh Tak’s brief delves into this issue from a macro-economic perspective by exploring what happens when big businesses—as opposed to states—gain the upper hand in determining what good food is. This has dire consequences for people’s health, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Indeed, the plurality of meanings that good food can acquire also intersects with ideas of health and well-being.

Francesca Vaghi’s ethnographic research explores the implications this has in the everyday lives of London parents with young children, by showing that what is good is not always the same as what is defined in national dietary guidelines and policies: What is good food for one child might not be so for another, and equally, what is deemed good food by experts one day is no longer so the next. In this context, the parents presented in Vaghi’s brief wonder what exactly they are supposed to feed their children, challenging the broader policies and discourses causing such confusion.

Brandi Simpson Miller’s historical analysis highlights that contesting good food is not a recent development: Looking at the oral histories of the Sukpe along the Gold Coast (pre-colonial Ghana), she shows that the meaning of good food (established through ritual) enabled them to lay claim to land during the eighteenth century. On the one hand, good food allowed the Sukpe to assert ownership against the neighboring and competing Ewe and to participate in the global economy on their own terms—not as slaves, but as salt producers and exporters. On the other hand, these oral histories served the British colonial government to cement territorial claims in the following century. Meanwhile, in Claudia Prieto-Piastro’s ethnography, similar but ongoing geopolitical struggles in Israel and Palestine are encapsulated in a “new local,” bestowing on the food of “enemies” renewed goodness, making it edible while (deliberately?) forgetting its contested local origins.

In our final brief, Mukta Das uses an ethnographic account to sketch out an argument wherein good food, as it relates to tasty food, is highly political and often racialized. In a postcolonial setting such as Macau, the dynamics of casino money, morality, Michelin stars, and heritage unite a racially diverse Portuguese-speaking elite over concerns with Macau’s rapidly increasing wealth generated through casino revenue, as well as its poorly understood culinary past. Yet, the re-emergence of the dish of porco balichão tamarinho proves difficult to locate in older Lisbon-centered schemes of taste, reflecting a little of the current state of geopolitics and the ascendancy of China and Asia.

In pointing to the multiple, often contradictory, ways in which food can be good, our piece emphasizes how scholarly attention to various ways of contesting food’s goodness—whether it be local or global, alternative or conventional, or simply spatially and temporally distant—can carry the debate about the value and meaning of food further. It shows how globally good food, for instance higher yielding seeds, can make you ill (Dewan) and may just not be good anymore from certain local perspectives (Colquhoun, Larmer, Graf). Definitions and uses of broader notions of good food may also serve to lay claim to contested territorial or national identity and, in doing so, un- or redo them (Colquhoun, Prieto-Piastro, Simpson Miller, Das). Finally, contemporary debates about what foods are good or bad may be just confusing and too manifold to mean anything in everyday discourses and practices (Vaghi), thus inviting in bigger players that can bypass existing local notions of good food altogether (Tak).

REFERENCES