Making Good Meat: From Draft Animal to Local Speciality

INCREASINGLY, REGIONS EMPHASIZE “local specialities” as iconic components of local cuisine and cultural heritage. In Croatian Istria, a breed of ox is being transformed from draft animal to gastronomic delicacy. Drawing on ongoing ethnographic research with food producers in Istria, I consider here how this meat’s value is created, what that tells us about wider dynamics in Istria, and how ideas about good food come about.

Across the peninsula’s rural interior most families once kept one or two oxen to pull the plow. Their meat was eaten rarely, either as veal by wealthier townfolk, or slow-cooked into goulash after twenty-plus years of service. By the late 1980s, due to the prevalence of tractors combined with the decline of mixed farming and rural depopulation, the breed had nearly died out. After the Yugoslav wars, which decimated Croatia’s coastal tourism, a breeders’ association and the Croatian Istrian region’s rural development agency (AZRRI) saw the opportunity to “revalorize” the Ox as cultural and natural heritage, and as premium meat, fit for Istria’s rebranding as a cultural and gastronomic tourism destination, and to create a locally embedded defense against newly available imported, cheaper beef. Following Grasseni and Paxson (2014), the Ox is a “reinvented” food.

Today, festivals celebrate the Ox with displays, souvenirs, and plowing competitions—now entertainment rather than backbreaking labor. The Ox is presented as ancient, natural, and part of an agricultural heritage unique to Istria, symbolic of the region’s strength, resilience, and longevity despite having been variously within the territories of Venice, Austria, Italy, Yugoslavia, and Croatia/Slovenia. This plays well in the context of regionalist politics, with local politicians always keen to be seen at such events. Meanwhile, AZRRI incentivizes breeders to produce steers, which they buy, fatten for slaughter, and supply to higher-end restaurants and some rural konobe (taverns). The meat is supplied with culinary training and a certification scheme. As a local speciality, the meat’s qualities of authenticity, “Istrianness,” and superior flavor are presented as givens, rooted in place by way of ancient genes, farming practices, and distinctive local ecology, and as safeguarded by AZRRI.

So far so good. However, talking to a range of farmers and restaurateurs I detected divergences beneath this standard narrative. It is commonly held that domaći (home-produced) food is better than that from “industrial” or distant sources, much like bread in Morocco (see Graf, below). Domaći is flexible, but implies knowability. The best meat, I am repeatedly told, comes “privately” from a known smallholder who fed the animal home-grown crops. For some, therefore, the larger-scale Ox fattening regime reduces the meat’s quality. And while certification asserts Istrian provenance and authenticity, for some it makes the meat less knowable, less domaći. Moreover, the scheme’s regulations bar “private” sales.

AZRRI worked hard on cross-breeding, feeding regimes, slaughter age, butchery, and aging to create bright red, quick-cooking cuts to suit modern global standards. But many remember the slow-cooked meat of a well-exercised older animal and prefer this “dark” meat to “supermarket meat,” which, as one konoba owner described with disgust, is pale and “soft like polenta in thirty minutes.” Ironically then, the local speciality is losing some distinctiveness as its qualities are being transformed to match global standards. For some, this represents higher-class.
taste, signals progress, and promises wealthier tourist customers. However, for others, it undermines Istria’s rural heritage and identity, and runs counter to small food producers’ and providers’ creation of value through their domaći credentials, which are not only appreciated by many local customers, but also a matter of pride and identity.

Higher-end urban restaurants often advertise their “creative” approach, combining local ingredients like Ox with novel flavors and modern techniques, while chefs at rural konobe stressed to me the importance of keeping dishes traditional and simple so as not to mask natural flavors, created by Istria’s unique conditions. For the former, good food is created by the talented chef, judged on a world stage, positioning Istria alongside other gastronomic destinations. For the latter, good food results from local knowledge, passed down from grandparents, and from natural resource management, positioning providers as “autochthonous” guardians of Istria’s agricultural heritage. Everyone agrees, however, Ox meat is not suitable for čevapčići, the minced meat patties popular across the former Yugoslavia. Such “Balkan” fare is deemed incompatible with “Istrian cuisine.”

This brief tour of a new local speciality demonstrates its tricky position. Producers materially and symbolically shape the Ox and its meat to create and capture value. In doing so, they engage with the product’s localness, a premium in the context of tourism and regionalism. This opens up questions of what, where, how, when, and who Istria is. In a borderland with several imperial legacies, linguistic and ethnic diversity, much migration and immigration, long-standing urban/coast and rural/interior divisions, and recent entry into globalized food markets, such questions have few straightforward answers. Producers’ values and visions concerning place thus combine with the creation of economic value in “economies of sentiment” (Paxson 2013: 65) within which good food—its authenticity, Istrianness, and taste—is variously conceived and contested. The case of the Istrian Ox indicates the value of examining what, and who, makes local specialities good food, and within what power relations. At stake in the case of the Istrian Ox is not only the future of the breed, and associated husbandry practices, but also what kind of meat will be available, to whom, and with what economic opportunities for different producers. Furthermore, these material manifestations continue to play into conceptualizations and experiences of Istria and Istrianness, indicating the inevitably political nature of local specialities.

REFERENCES