

Living Food Heritage in the Global Semiosphere: Tourism, Tactics, and Translation

Negotiating Authenticity, Commodification, and Gastrodiplomacy

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Preface

Living food heritage embodies a complex paradox, functioning simultaneously as a vessel for memory and as an evolving symbol of identity, a confluence of individual practices and collective knowledge. Furthermore, it emerges as a strategic element, often contested across various domains, such as tourism and global policy discourse.

Drawing on de Certeau's framework (1984), this issue proposes an examination of the tension between food heritage as a lived experience and daily tactical practice, and its strategic construction, perceived as a static and immutable myth. The articles assembled in this issue critically investigate the multifaceted ways in which food heritage traverses this tension, revealing processes of translation, recreation, and negotiation across the permeable boundaries between authenticity and commodification, local and global, as well as tradition and transformation.

The concept of food heritage, as articulated by the Call for Papers, is presented as an evolving construct rather than a static entity confined to archival collections. This perspective aligns with Lotman's notion of semiosphere (2005), where meanings are constantly generated and disseminated across boundaries. Strategic narratives developed by tourism discourse, heritage valorization protocols, and institutions tend to crystallize this fluidity, constructing a stable myth of the place, taste, and culture associated with it. In contrast to this are everyday tactics—consisting of adaptations and re-appropriations—that anchor meanings to the lived experiences of consumption, production, and conviviality. In this Issue, the contributions explore this friction by investigating how the identity of the “other” is defined and challenged through the lens of food.

The contributions presented herein explore the themes of living food heritage through interdisciplinary perspectives, including semiotics, food studies, tourism studies, sociology, and territorial geography. They highlight the mechanisms of meaning-making, resistance, translation, and the pursuit of authenticity that characterize this phenomenon

The contribution “Ethical and philosophical approaches to the value of food, starting from Feuerbach's food theory”, by Sebastian Ciancio, explores the philosophical and ethical foundations of food heritage, tracing a genealogy that extends from Feuerbach's dictum “Der Mensch ist, was er isst” (man is what he eats) back to Aristotle, Lévi-Strauss, and Derrida. Ciancio's central reflection is that food heritage requires not only historical and anthropological definition but also a philosophical grounding. In this light, recognizing food as a symbolic mechanism that shapes identity makes it possible to understand specific food practices and the reasons why they are preserved, transmitted, and renegotiated as heritage. Drawing on Derrida, the author argues that “to be a subject means to eat,” and that this practice is inextricably linked to relations of otherness, identity, and responsibility (Derrida 2004).

While the first contribution focuses on philosophical foundations, Federica Brachini's article, “The Myth of the Nonna: Tactics, Strategies, and Italian Food Heritage on TikTok”, offers a semiotic analysis of how culinary heritage is translated, renegotiated, and commodified through digital platforms. Focusing on Italian TikTok profiles, Brachini outlines a continuum ranging from editorial-style documentary observation to commercial branding. Her analysis demonstrates how the figure of the grandmother functions

as a “contemporary myth” in the sense defined by Barthes (1957). In this regard, it acts as a sign through which digital discourse constructs an idea of authenticity—one portrayed as both natural and rooted in emotion. The discursive strategies employed—such as close-ups of time-worn hands kneading dough—serve as “reality effects” (Barthes 1968), establishing a bond of trust between the image and the viewer. However, as the author observes, these everyday practices are made visible, aestheticized, and reabsorbed into the circulation economy of social media. Food heritage on TikTok, therefore, does not appear as a static object transmitted unaltered; rather, it presents itself as a living semiotic practice, constantly re-signified through the interplay of body, memory, platform, and market.

In his contribution, “Living Food Heritage, the Experience of Taste, and the Discursive Construction of Authenticity,” Alberto Grandi returns to a philosophical register, exploring the interplay between discursive construction and embodied experience. Drawing on the aesthetics of taste, the semiotics of food, and Derridean reflections on naming and the archive, the essay views food as cultural heritage, not merely because it preserves memory or evokes tradition, but because it is lived, recognized, named, and transmitted within cultural frameworks that shape its value. In this regard, the author highlights the concept of “cultural ingestion,” which posits that knowing a food entails more than simply recognizing its flavor; it involves engaging with the culture that the food conveys. At the same time, the essay emphasizes the constructive power of discourse. The concept of the “absent referent” (Adams 2020) is reinterpreted through a discursive lens, demonstrating how language can transform a specific entity into a generic object, thereby making it more readily available for symbolic and material consumption. Within this framework, authenticity is not the reproduction of the identical, but rather a “dynamic fidelity”, the capacity to maintain a meaningful continuity between what has been and what continues to transform. It concludes that food heritage should be considered as a relational process in which cultural memory, materiality, and symbolic construction are intertwined rather than functioning as fixed entities.

Miriam Al Tawil’s contribution, “From Bedouin Dish to National Symbol: Mansaf and the Making of Jordanian Identity”, examines the relationship between food, identity, and heritage-making in Jordan through ethnographic research conducted among Bedouin, Druze, and rural communities. Particular

attention is given to the transformation of mansaf from a situated culinary practice into a national and touristic symbol. In dialogue with debates on food heritage and cultural imaginaries (Appadurai 1988; Brulotte & Di Giovine 2014), the article highlights how tourism discourse produces forms of staged authenticity (MacCannell 1973), often privileging a simplified Bedouin representation of Jordanian identity over the diversity of lived regional foodways.

Denise Buttigieg Fiteni's "From Heritage to Sustainability: Exploring Traditional Emirati Food Practices as a Framework for Sustainable Food Education" shifts attention towards the pedagogical and regenerative potential of living food heritage. Drawing on the principles of Education for Sustainable Development and experiential learning, the study explores how traditional culinary knowledge may connect cultural continuity, food literacy, and sustainability. In this perspective, food heritage becomes not simply something to be preserved, but a situated form of knowledge transmitted through practice and intergenerational exchange (Pagano 2023; Varzakas & Antoniadou 2024).

Haruka Ueda's "Japan's Gastrodiplomacy: A Historical Overview" extends the discussion from local heritage practices to the transnational circulation of national cuisines. Situating Japanese gastrodiplomacy within a *longue durée* perspective, the article shows how *washoku* has been continuously reconstructed through diplomatic encounters, heritage policies, markets, and global circulation (Bestor 2014; Cwiertka 2018). Drawing on Fischler's concept of gastro-anomy (1990) and Chang's notion of compressed modernity (2025), it interprets contemporary gastrodiplomacy not simply as nation branding, but as part of a broader process through which food identities are renegotiated under conditions of accelerated globalization.

Amanuel Ezra Sahledingle's "Culinary Gentrification in the UAE: Authenticity, Commodification, and Hybridity in the Making of Emirati Cuisine" provides a systematic review of the literature to shed light on the forces shaping the social construction of Emirati cuisine. Specifically, the review approaches the extant literature on Emirati food through the lens of four interconnected aspects: authenticity, commodification, hybridity, and resistance. By mobilising and incorporating Laurajane Smith's Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD) alongside Homi Bhabha's concept of "Third Space" and postcolonial theories, his analysis critically assesses the process

of gentrification of Emirati cuisines that emerges at the intersection of national heritage discourse and lived practices. Importantly, using the example of chai karak, the analysis contributes to the existing body of knowledge by proposing a novel semiotic perspective that considers the role of contestation and negotiation in the social production and transmission of Emirati cuisine and heritage.

Caterina Sciarra's contribution, "Visual brandtelling territoriale del gusto: patrimonio alimentare vivente e turismo digitale", follows the argument that food heritage is a socially constructed phenomenon by analysing its production, position and role in the context of digital tourism. Drawing on Lotman's notion of "semiosphere", her contribution explores how food narratives are produced, reiterated, and contested within broader place-branding strategies that aim to represent and promote local living communities, spaces, and places. Arguably, such strategies tend to construct presumed representations of the "authentic" and the "local" through narratives that assemble mythical visual and sensorial aspects.

Salvatore Lampreu's contribution, "Narrare la ruralità tra geografia e semiotica. Il Distretto Rurale della Barbagia nella semiosfera del patrimonio alimentare sardo", offers the concluding contribution to the special issue. Specifically, his work conceptualises representations of the rural district of Barbagia in Sardinia, Italy, as "semiotic membranes" that select, translate, and organise aspects of a local rural community into cohesive depictions. Importantly, the article highlights the potential of such representations to foster tourism-led local development and wider economic opportunities in an area experiencing population decline and limited tourist flows.

In conclusion, the contributions to this Special Issue, taken together, map out a cartography of living food heritage, examining how it is negotiated, contested, and translated across multiple contexts. This mapping ranges from the everyday food practices and tourism imaginaries of Jordan to the intergenerational transmission of Emirati culinary traditions and their role in sustainability education, from the semiotic boundaries of Sardinia to the historical and global reconfiguration of Japanese cuisine through gastrodiploacy.

Through these explorations, the contributions converge on a shared insight: food heritage remains alive precisely because of the tension between strategic myth and narratives and everyday tactics and practices.

Furthermore, this issue is characterized by its interdisciplinary framework. The contributions interweave semiotics, ethnographic inquiry, food and heritage studies, geography, tourism studies, sustainability education, sociology, and cultural and diplomatic history, advancing the discourse on food heritage and issues surrounding tradition, authenticity, identity, transmission, and commodification. This interdisciplinary approach has important implications for heritage policy, tourism strategies, education, and cultural diplomacy, as well as for broader international heritage frameworks such as UNESCO. It encourages a shift away from preserving static representations of heritage and emphasizes the vital conditions of food heritage: the practices and transformations that enable communities to transmit, adapt, and renegotiate their food identities and traditions. It also draws attention to the asymmetries involved in heritage-making: between institutions and communities, official narratives and lived practices, and global representations and local forms of belonging.

This special issue serves as a foundation for future research by proposing comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives that track, rather than merely define, food heritage amidst its various changes, representations, spaces, and practices, while paying equal attention to community-led tactics and institutional strategies. Rather than approaching food heritage primarily as an object to be preserved, such perspectives invite us to follow the processes of selection, transmission, reinterpretation, and circulation through which heritage remains meaningful. The fundamental objective for readers is to encourage them to view these contributions not as isolated studies but as elements of a shared conversation, one that, like the food heritage being examined, is open and continuously evolving.

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