

EUROPEAN FOOD ISSUES

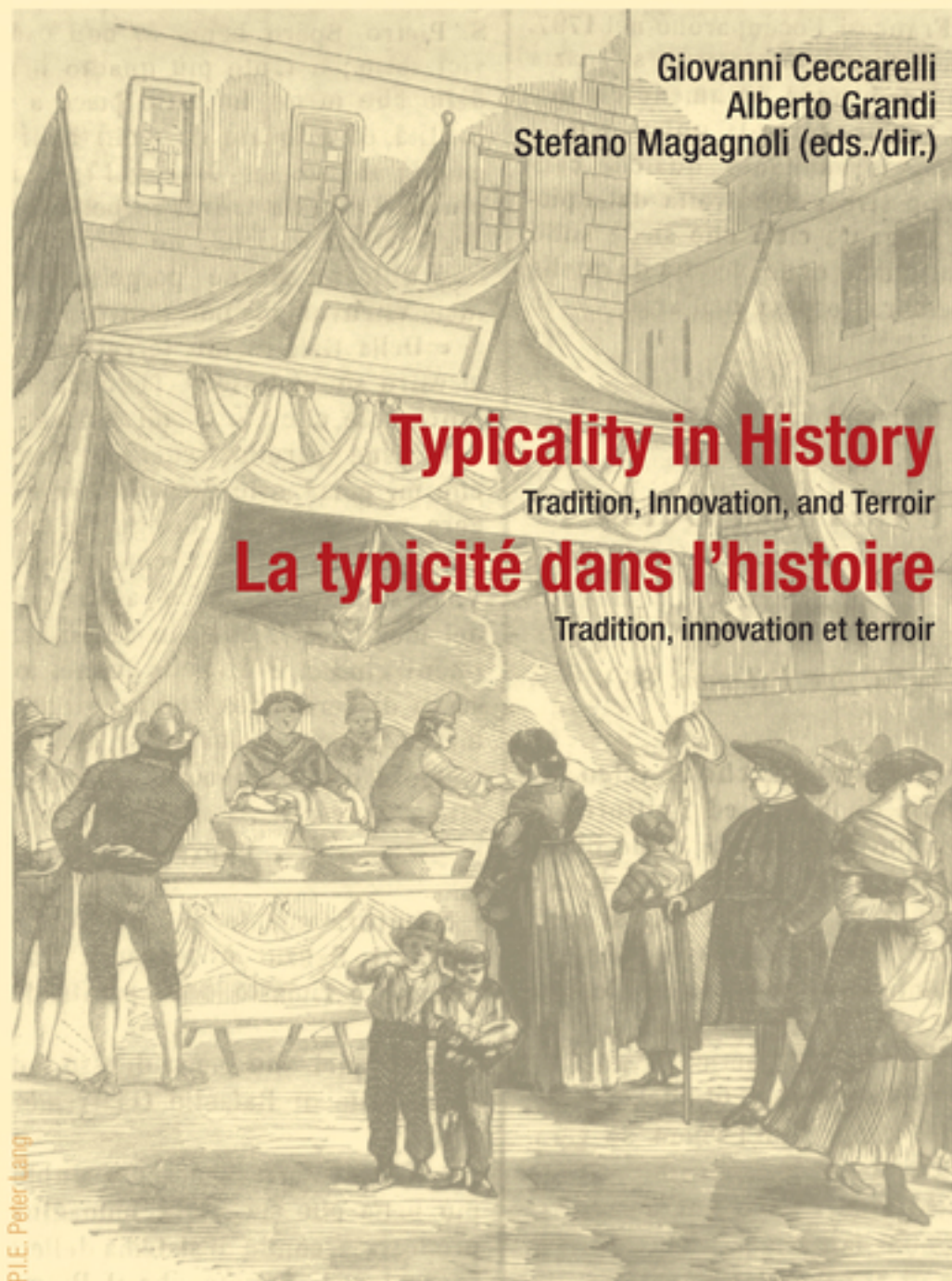
Giovanni Ceccarelli
Alberto Grandi
Stefano Magagnoli (eds./dir.)

Typicality in History

Tradition, Innovation, and Terroir

La typicité dans l'histoire

Tradition, innovation et terroir



Typicality in History

Tracing a Basic Definition

Giovanni CECCARELLI, Alberto GRANDI,
Stefano MAGAGNOLI

Università di Parma – Food Lab, Dipartimento di Economia

Food history is a fully recognized field of research in academic communities around the world. Degree courses and postgraduates have focused on cultural, social and anthropological aspects rather than technical or dietary aspects of food. And academic associations now exist to investigate food history and culture; these include ICREFH (International Commission for Research into European Food History), set up in 1989, and IEHCA (Institut Européen d'Histoire et des Cultures de l'Alimentation), founded in 2002 and home of the Cultural Food Studies Centre. There are also many new journals such as “Food and History”, that appeared in 2003, and “Food and Foodways” that first appeared as far back as 1985.

Traditionally, food history has been examined within the two main areas of economic and social history; the history of agriculture, and, albeit in a slightly more indirect manner, urban history. Towns were after all home to guilds, which maintained and promoted artisan skills, and moreover towns, at least in Italy, were home to the nobility for whom meals meant pleasure and the opportunity of showing off their wealth. The history of agriculture is obviously more robust as a discipline and has a more established academic tradition and methodology. The roots of typical products in farming traditions and local area appear to be more natural and direct. It may be surprising, then, that although traditions are strong, recent research has found that the links between traditions and foods can be somewhat weaker than they appear.

Academic debate is currently lively and is in rapid evolution. In this context, this volume sets out to report more than the proceedings of a

conference held in Parma in late 2010, where issues related to the history of typical food were discussed.¹ Conference issues are becoming central to economics and cultural and social studies extremely rapidly, so it is useful to update and enlarge the proceedings. The history of the concept of the “typical” nature of food products raises general problems such as “area”, “identity”, innovation” and development. This book brings into the arena of discussion various fields of interest, as well as providing a forum for inter-relation of these issues.

When the idea of a conference on typical products and their history was first mooted by the Parma Food Lab – Laboratorio per la storia dell'alimentazione, it became clear that although publications abounded, there was no theoretical framework into which they could be fitted. There even was dissatisfaction with the indeterminate theoretical ideological framework forming the background for most research. Historical research on typical products, although well documented, tends to be somewhat hagiographic. This is because of two main reasons; first, such studies are often published to celebrate anniversaries or achievements of typical produce associations, perhaps by local authorities. And second, the conventional cultural paradigm is that a typical product by definition is the result of a long-term process of sedimentation and a basically unchanged production process, subject to technological or legislative modification.

It is also important to note that in recent years, typical products have acquired importance in agricultural policy debate, especially within the European Union. Not surprisingly, this debate has strong ideological connotations: typical products have become the standard bearer for an agri-food sector considered to be “healthy” and “good”, in opposition to mass production and levelling of tastes imposed by “evil” multinationals.² Introducing differentiation and subtlety into debate exposes them to the risk of instrumentalization and preconceived concepts. It sometimes appears that enriching the debate is taken to be a form of lese majesty. But the model is unavoidably complicated by empirical evidence; the concept of typicality cannot be studied in isolation from “area”, “tradition”, “identity”, “market”, “consumption” or “local development”. Almost all contributions gathered in this book focus on these elements: together they comprise, if not a structural framework, an organic cultural frame.

¹ *La tipicità nella storia: tradizione, innovazione e territorio*, held in Parma and Langhirano, September 9th-11th, 2010.

² This approach may also emerge in excellent scholarly works, see for example Trubeck, A.B., *The Taste of Place: A Cultural Journey into Terroir*, Berkeley, California University Press, 2008.

During the Parma conference, awareness arose that, although the papers were based on different disciplines and methodologies, they all led to the search for a coherent, overall definition. Such framework is at the basis of this book, since the contributions clearly define three major fields of investigation: tradition building, the role of institutions and the relationships with the area. From the historical point of view, typicality can thus be considered as the outcome of the three elements of tradition, institutions and territory, which constitute the broad outline for classification of research.

Contributions included in this book examine separate aspects of food history, but they can all be assembled into a single paradigm. The first contribution by Madeleine Ferrières focuses on one of the three macro-themes with an examination of the French term *terroir*, which has a wider meaning than “territory”. As Ferrières observes, historians need to use it with care, particularly where it constitutes the subject of debate, as in the case of typical products. But whether “territory” is considered as economic, social, political or in other ways, it is becoming an increasingly important term for historians.

After having examined the history of the term “terroir”, Ferrières focuses on its relation to food history, suggesting that geographical characterisation of foods not only preceded the birth of gastronomic tradition. In addition, this characterisation appears to have predated a codified use of the word “terroir”. In fact during the *Ancien Régime*, produce tended to be protected on an explicitly geographical basis. This was true for all artisan products (and not only food), and was partly a result of the rise of the guilds in the Middle Ages.³ The picture however varies across Europe. Thus a direct link seems to connect institutional systems of protections and guarantees on territorial and urban basis in medieval times (in, for example, France and Italy) to today’s protected denominations.⁴ In England, however, under a different cultural and economic system, the *commercial revolution* brought about “l’affirmation d’une typicité sans terroir”. Variables in the model of typicality include the rarity and the availability of a product as well as the geography, history and climate of an area. Also important are the

³ Guenzi, A., Massa, P., Piola Caselli, F., (eds.), *Guilds, Markets and Work Regulations in Italy, 16th-19th centuries*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 1998.

⁴ Capatti, A., Montanari, M., *La cucina italiana: storia di una cultura*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1999; Montanari, M., *L'Europa a tavola: storia dell'alimentazione dal Medioevo a oggi*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2008; *Gli archivi per la storia dell'alimentazione: atti del convegno, Potenza-Matera, 5-settembre 1988*, Roma, Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali-Ufficio centrale per i beni archivistici, 1995.

distance and the exotic nature of the place of origin, which may be real or imagined.

This aspect appears to have played a long-term key role in building up the concept of typicality, particularly in the United Kingdom, which, because of its large urban population and early industrialisation constituted the main market for products from all over the world. Maura Franchi shows how a typical product evokes “elsewhere”, places far away in time and/or distance. In a sense a product to be perceived as typical requires a background of legend or myth. This was true in the first half of XIXth century London and Boston and it is still true today in post-industrial supermarkets all over the world. It was true for Madeira wine as the Anglo-American upper classes sipped it and imagined sea-faring adventures,⁵ and it is true today for lardo di Colonnata,⁶ which evokes the hard life of the marble quarriers near Carrara in Tuscany, who consumed lard for its high content in calories and fat. The consumption of a food and consumer satisfaction are always based on an element of identification grounded on a legend or a myth. In fact, the briefest glance at any ancient cookbook, from that of Apicius onwards, shows that ingredients are used for their background in terms of place of origin as much as for their contribution to the taste of the dish.

The legendary or mythical aspect is thus an important part of typicality. It often needs to be *built up*. But this does not entail diminishing the importance of the intrinsic quality; rather, it means placing appreciation within a context of individual and collective cultural references. Taste “is both *premise* and *result* in the construction of a typical food product”, it is “the result of a storytelling”.⁷ This clearly leads to a reconsideration of the history of marketing, and also sheds new light on the use of history made by the marketing industry. Typical products since their appearance have constituted a testing ground for marketing. It is one thing to consume a local product that was also eaten by one’s forbears, or to buy fashionable clothes and shoes that we ourselves do not know how to make or copy. But it is completely different to eat unfamiliar food. We require a great deal of persuasion to eat it. Naturally, we also require a degree of disposable income and an efficient trade structure. But myths and legends always

⁵ Hancock, D., *Oceans of Wine: Madeira and the Emergence of American Trade and Taste*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009.

⁶ Galoppini, L., (a cura di), *Il lardo nell'alimentazione toscana dall'antichità ai nostri giorni*, Modena, Aedes Muratoriana, 2003.

⁷ See below Franchi, M., *The Contents of Typical Food Products: Tradition, Myth, Memory. Some Notes on Nostalgia Marketing*.

need to be there to persuade consumers to experiment with new foods and try out new emotions in food.

Marketing, trade structure and disposable income can only appear once there is capital and industrialization; hence, the typical product came about at the time of industrialization. There is a clear paradox in that product success is based on authenticity, naturalness and artisan *savoir-faire*, while at the same time it needs standard industrial production to exist, and trading and distribution channels for its appeal to reach as many consumers as possible. It requires to be a legend, which needs to be strengthened even it is adapted at the same time. The product also often needs to safeguard an inviolable and sacrosanct “purity” in the eyes of consumers. Hence the appearance of *Avatar* products.⁸

There are numerous example of typical products that first appeared as imitations of luxury products. Marsala wine first appeared as an imitation of the most reputed Madeira, Port and Sherry wines. Other typical products gained an international reputation only once they were mass produced; these include the renowned Christmas sweets like the *Panettone di Milano* and the *Pandoro di Verona*. These were originally artisan products, although today they are almost exclusively industrially produced and the original is no longer present even on their earliest market.

The papers by Philippe Meyzie, Anneke Geyzen and Régis Huguenin are all set against this background, describing for different historical periods the construction of gastronomic specialties in the South East of France, the building of the Flemish cuisine and the better known case of Swiss chocolate. The latter is to some extent surprising, as it carries the image of the country as a whole, but this image has very little to do with the reality of the production process. The traditional icons of dairy cows, Swiss chalets, snow-covered peaks and green pastures were no longer part of production from the mid-XXth century onwards. As far back as the early 1900s, the big brands such as Nestlé, Suchard, Tobler, and Lindt had started internationalisation by locating production overseas. It was paradoxical, but only to a certain extent, that marketing strategy strengthened the link with the image of Switzerland just as chocolate manufacturing was almost entirely shifted elsewhere.

The case of Swiss chocolate also provides a link with the second part of the book that focuses on the role of institutions. From at least the 1960s, institutions in Switzerland, both public and private, engaged in

⁸ See below Ceccarelli, G., Grandi, A., Magagnoli, S., *The Avatar: An Economic History Paradigm for Typical Products*.

product certification and protection of national identity, however shaky this was in reality.

On a different continent, Fabio Parasecoli describes the attempts by local institutions in Costa Rica to strengthen local development through Turrialba cheese. In the 1990s this was identified as a potential driver of development by using specialized agriculture in a backward area. In Austria too, cheese became a decisive part of regional identity in the area of Grosses Walsertal, and as described by Norbert Weixlbaumer and Stefan Kah, even affected environmental policy.

Cristina Grasseni makes an even more detailed analysis of strategies used to protect typical products in the Italian Alps, particularly in Lombardy. Safeguarding product quality is unbreakably tied to promoting of the area of production and the cultural identity of its inhabitants. The case of Taleggio shows that if institutions are feeble in defending a typical product, producers can develop a bottom-up strategy of extra protection, creating an even more exclusive cheese (*strachitunt*). This case also provides indirect confirmation of the Avatar paradigm. David Burigana traces a history of European integration through the trade in typical cheeses between Italy and France. This unusual account moves from micro to macro level and provides a fascinating insight into international relations as well as the history of typical products. It shows that the “typical product system” was exploited as a way of bringing about review of Community Agricultural Policy (CAP). The history of food, as this contribution reveals, is thus charged with greater political significance than might superficially appear. Typical products may become a political fiefdom, an exclusive right that needs to be defended at all costs. It is not only marketing that forces the creation of a legend around a typical product, there may be strong political considerations as well. Gloria Sanz Lafuente provides a case study of a single specific product. She describes how multiple scientific and political administrations arrived at a definition of quality standards for cider, a traditional Spanish drink. This was a top-down process that gradually obliged producers to adapt to new or more standardised production systems and models of taste.

The third part of the book links the agri-food dimension of typicality with integrated local promotion, especially tourism. Today wine and gastronomic routes or trails are a large and increasingly important factor in tourism, and the enhancement and exploitation of tradition can be a trump card on this highly competitive market. France and Italy have better exploited this relation to foster local development.

If one traces a two-dimensional map of regions important for tourism and places that give their name to typical products in Italy and France, would find that these areas tend to overlap. Institutional policies that

lead to a product's denomination of origin may cause not only the success of that product, but also attract more tourists in that region. Christian Barrère's contribution explicitly describes the "construction of typicality" by comparing three areas of sparkling wine production in France. Similarly, Simone Kovatz provides a geography of wine, starting from the years after the Unification of Italy in 1861. Focusing on Chianti, Luca Mocarrelli shows how the process leading to denomination of origin of this wine and its production area was far from straightforward, even though Chianti has enjoyed a high profile reputation on international markets since the Middle Age. This aspect is examined in detail by Ezio Ritrovato for the southern Italian region of Puglia, where the development of the wine industry has played a key role in the development of tourism. This link is confirmed by Annunziata Berrino who demonstrates that typicality has become a driving factor in tourism all over Italy in the last thirty years. In the province of Reggio Emilia, production of Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and particularly the re-introduction of the traditional breeds of cattle, whose historical back-ground is provided by Marie-Lucie Rossi, is now playing a key role in local development. This part of the book may appear to deal with issues peripheral to those faced by the rest of the contribution. But this is only superficially the case. Study of a typical product as an element of local identity, spurious and tourism-led as it may be, entails focusing on its essential characteristic.

We noted above that in history the definition of typicality has been based on "tradition", "institutions" and "territory". All three of these aspects are however open to modification and change. As Mario Zannoni shows in the last part of this book (in which some empirical experiences are gathered), this can be sometimes the outcome of major technological improvements. But as a number of contributions points out historical rooting can even be completely re-invented.

The mystique of typical products is subject to radical discussion and it would be impossible to ascribe less importance to it. But this would not be fair or honest. In reality, it would be incorrect to ascribe the know-how and labour forming part of each and every typical product solely to a remote and unclear past. These factors are also part and parcel of the attempts and strategies of local institutions and producers to bring their products to consumers in the modern world today.