

GASTRONOMIC HERITAGE, TOURIST MOBILITY AND DISTINCTION¹

*PATRIMÔNIO GASTRONÔMICO,
MOBILIDADE TURÍSTICA E DISTINÇÃO*

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ABSTRACT: The article explores the relationship between gastronomy, tourist mobility, and social distinction based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory. Food goes beyond nutrition, optionally as a marker of status and cultural identity. The consumption of traditional foods and wines is linked to cultural and social capital, reinforcing class divisions. Globalization and digitalization have transformed gastronomy into a media and symbolic experience, where distinction is expressed through access to luxury restaurants and the heritage of cuisine. Wine and gastronomy tourism reflects these dynamic, segmenting visitors into consumers of elite experiences and mass tourists. Furthermore, the text criticizes the invention of gastronomic traditions and the use of storytelling to create narratives that legitimize exclusionary practices. In the current context, the desire for haute cuisine is reinforced by the media, but remains inaccessible to many, maintaining a social position through consumption.

KEYWORDS: Distinction. Gastronomic Culture. Tradition. Tourism. Pierre Bourdieu.

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RESUMO: O artigo explora a relação entre gastronomia, mobilidade turística e distinção social, fundamentando-se na teoria de Pierre Bourdieu. Parte-se da premissa de que a alimentação vai além da nutrição, atuando como marcador de status e identidade cultural. O consumo de alimentos e vinhos tradicionais, por exemplo, está ligado ao capital cultural e social, reforçando divisões de classe. Assim, a globalização e a digitalização transformaram a gastronomia numa experiência midiática e simbólica, onde a distinção se expressa pelo acesso a restaurantes de luxo e pela patrimonialização da culinária. O turismo enogastronômico reflete essa dinâmica, segmentando visitantes entre consumidores de experiências elitizadas e turistas de massa. Além disso, o texto critica a invenção de tradições gastronômicas e o uso do storytelling para criar narrativas que legitimam práticas excludentes. No contexto atual, o desejo pela alta gastronomia é reforçado pela mídia, mas permanece inacessível para muitos, mantendo uma posição social através do consumo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Distinção. Cultura Gastronômica. Tradição. Turismo. Pierre Bourdieu.

RESUMEN: El artículo explora la relación entre gastronomía, movilidad turística y distinción social, a partir de la teoría de Pierre Bourdieu. La comida va más allá de la nutrición y, opcionalmente, como marcador de estatus e identidad cultural. El consumo de alimentos y vinos tradicionales está vinculado al capital cultural y social, lo que refuerza las divisiones de clases. La globalización y la digitalización han transformado la gastronomía en una experiencia mediática y simbólica, donde la distinción se expresa a través del acceso a restaurantes de lujo y al patrimonio de la cocina. El turismo enológico y gastronómico refleja esta dinámica, segmentando a los visitantes en consumidores de experiencias de élite y turistas de masas. Además, el texto critica la invención de tradiciones gastronómicas y el uso de storytelling para crear narrativas que legitiman prácticas excluyentes. En el contexto actual, el deseo por la alta cocina se ve reforzado por los medios de comunicación, pero sigue siendo inaccesible para muchos, manteniendo una posición social a través del consumo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Distinción. Cultura Gastronómica. Tradición. Turismo. Pierre Bourdieu.

What you eat represent your social status [...].

The poors eat to end their hunger.

But when you can buy more than food, your hunger doesn't end.

You hunger for approval, for something special, for exclusive experiences.

(The Hunger, 2023).

Introduction

Eating is part of life, and not only from a nutritional standpoint. We do not eat merely to “kill hunger,” but also to nourish our social interactions, as well as the trends and images of fashion. After all, the world of food is also a world of images, transformed into magazine photos, scenes from television shows, food pictures shared on social media, posters, films, and even real estate sales.

Not by chance, an emerging element in the creation of intangible heritage in recent years is the so-called “gastronomic tradition.” In this article, we aim to study how the relationship between mobility, tourism marketing, and the “invention of traditions” has been established from the perspective of encouraging cultural and consumption practices, based on the concept of “distinction” coined by Bourdieu (2007). The article addresses the following points:

- 1) The creation of “gastronomic traditions,” considering eating habits and rituals and the storytelling about culinary traditions;
- 2) The identification of cultural practices in the production and consumption of “traditional,” “local,” and “typical” foods and wines from a sociological perspective that allows us to consider experiences linked to cultural capital and social variables, such as personal experiences, the formation of eating habits in the family, reference groups, and the media. Foods are enriched through captivating symbolism that stimulates “taste memories” through images and words in diverse sociocultural contexts.

Food and distinction: how Bourdieu came to the table

Almost an obsession, cooking, gastronomy, pots, and recipes are appearing everywhere: social media, streaming platforms, television, newspapers, magazines, radio, bookstores, advertisements, and libraries. Eating has become fashionable; it is a topic that sparks passion and leads people to stand in long lines seeking “gastronomic experiences.” The intention here is not to say that the importance of food has grown, but rather that the power of its communication has increased.

Eating is a social and political phenomenon, in addition to being a natural one. Pierre Bourdieu includes food culture within the various domains of cultural practices, conceptualizing it as a “politics of taste” (Bourdieu, 2007). Moreover, in contemporary capitalist society, where the forces of economic crises result in a drastically mixed and contradictory blend of austerity and the expansion of consumer power, the “food landscape” appears to have been reshaped as a problem inextricably linked to various other aspects of human life, such as work and leisure, production and consumption, all entangled in the hierarchical classification system of economic, cultural, and social capital.

The development of digital media in a dynamic and transforming society challenges any notion of culture or identity as monolithic forces. Instead, it reinforces the idea of a community that, even while maintaining its cultural specificity, is open to exploring distant worlds. Identity construction is shaped by the rapidly changing circumstances of social life on both local and global scales, where individuals and collectives integrate information and knowledge from a wide diversity of experiences accessible through digital networks. Today, the classic elements of collective identity definition – such as language, territory, religion, common past, or shared culture – while still relevant, now compete with other factors: ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) equip individuals and communities with the ability to present and self-represent.

The globalization of culture has a long history. The development and spread of religions, for example, show how ideas cross continents and influence societies. Today, the concept of globalization is mainly used to refer to three processes: the globalization of the world economy, global mobility, and the global diffusion of cultural forms and meanings (Ashcroft; Griffith; Tiffin, 2007). Information and communication technologies have opened countless channels that cross national borders and generate an enormous number of new images and cultural habits, moving very quickly, even though significant differences still exist in the density and speed of information across different regions of the world. Globalization involves increasing mobility beyond borders – the mobility of goods, information, and people. Cultural and collective identities occupy a central place in contemporary communication theory and in cultural and sociological theory in general. In short, cultural and collective identities are being constructed in new ways that signal a fundamental transformation of the human experience. Especially for the global middle class, the construction of cultural identity increasingly reflects exposure to abundant symbolic resources and discourses transmitted through ICTs.

Bourdieu's theories provide us with an effective interpretive key to understanding cultural investment in gastronomic knowledge. The author offers a theoretical model through which it is possible to observe the elements constituting individual lifestyles as outcomes of what he calls *habitus*, which he defines as a set of dispositions and perceptual structures internalized by individuals at different stages of socialization, such as moral choices, political opinions, eating habits, tastes, and cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1989).

Class *habitus* plays a role in the construction of symbolic practices among social groups, reinforcing internal cohesion. These are acquired through informal mechanisms that “permeate” us, thus differing from conscious learning. For Bourdieu (1989), what ensures the reproduction of social classes more than economic capital is the transmission of what he calls cultural capital, which from childhood creates differences in treatment that are difficult to compensate for, generating closed

boundaries between social groups. Indeed, the space of taste and cultural habits is socially differentiated and hierarchical, and imbued with power relations, since cultural practices and preferences, combined with the social position of individuals within a unified and hierarchical conception of lifestyle spaces, generate a system in which the subject's social identity reflects both positive adherence to the preferences of their environment and aversion to those of other groups (Bourdieu, 1989).

In this specific case, we are interested in the social space of "gastronomic" taste and its cultural practices, organized according to the volume and nature of the individuals' economic and cultural capital. Economic capital, which allows for consumption (in addition to ownership), when combined with aesthetic preferences and cultural practices, establishes the rites of identification within social life.

We are naively led to believe that taste is an instinctive and natural phenomenon, but in reality, it is the result of a sociocultural learning process that introduces cultural divisions among subjects from different classes and contexts, creating groupings based on tastes and consumer preferences. At the same time, it affirms the impossibility of communicating these differences. The exquisitely conscious class-derived pleasure that can be found in anything that conveys a certain "cultural capital" has been canonized and structured, but unlike literature and art, our value judgments regarding matters of taste related to food are (usually) unconscious.

Although Bourdieu's theory (1989) provides a stable starting point for deciphering the reality of cultural practices, we must consider that today, it has become difficult to distinguish cultural elites based on old indicators, such as regular attendance at concerts, visits to museums and exhibitions, and other traditional cultural practices. While there are still individuals who consider themselves cultural elites (true enthusiasts and "better informed"), the current landscape is quite different from what could be observed a few decades ago: cultural elites now appear to be composed more of "omnivores" than strict connoisseurs – subjects with a very broad repertoire of cultural consumption who nonetheless still attribute to themselves the ability to distinguish the "beautiful" from the "vulgar" or the "appropriate" from the "inappropriate." In this sense, we can speak of a shift in interest from snobbery to a rather heterogeneous form of consumption. The clash between cultural capitals is no longer identified within a narrow divide between one (refined) taste and another (vulgar), but rather between consumers who pursue hits, "trends," and "events" (without creating a canon) and those who still privilege canonized cultural practices from before the advent of ICTs. In short: between those who reproduce the distinction between "high" and "low" culture and those who, on the other hand, have incorporated in their own way the cultural hypothesis established through Raymond Williams's reflections, when he states that "Culture is Common" (1958).

Nonetheless, cultural capital, despite this shift toward a much broader enjoyment of product categories, still seems to maintain its function of demarcating and

protecting class divisions. Just as art objects were once assigned to environments that excluded other products in order to function, the same seems to be reproduced when we talk about distinction in the field of food practices and the development of a common imagination about what we generically call gastronomy. Here, too, for distinction to function, it must be performed through the allocation of environments accessible only to high-income classes which, at the same time, become objects of aspiration for those who, instead of accessing them, can only consume their images. Even in gastronomy, then, what matters is not always the “content” or the “quality” – which we will soon discuss – but rather the incompatibility with what is ordinary and common. The mediatized space of food thus becomes the site of a cultural elite that defines its “refined” taste and a site of aspiration for the middle classes, in opposition to “vulgar” tastes.

In contemporary Western societies, therefore, food becomes one of the aspects of social stratification, forming the basis for an analysis of inequalities and social relations. We consider these observations on the social stratification of cultural practices necessary insofar as, in recent years, the gastronomic landscape has fueled debates that have guided cultural public policy choices, especially those related to (gastronomic) tourism.

Within this theoretical framework, an individual from the cultural “elite” who finds gastronomy difficult, impenetrable, or hermetic would be accused (within circles endowed with such cultural capital) of conformism. On the other hand, the gastronomic connoisseur who enjoys consumption tied to this cultural capital is attributed with that “gift of nature” typical of the “original” subject who opposes the system. It is worth noting that familiarity with high culture, understood here as gastronomic culture, and the denial of mass food practices continue to represent a clear opposition between the dominant and dominated classes. In other words, the social space structured by the hierarchy of tastes and practices constitutes a space of domination. In this sense, the representation of practices related to gastronomic culture also allows for a Bourdieusian interpretation of a tool consciously used to mark class differences and protect them (Bourdieu, 2020).

In the following paragraphs, we will attempt to better understand this culture in order to highlight to what extent it is a technique for maintaining class distinctions and social hierarchies. Gastronomic culture (emphasizing here that we are not simply talking about eating habits) develops as a hegemonic culture – that is, the one represented by the elites, those individuals capable of finding meaning in something defined as good and appropriate. Once again, even having become culturally omnivorous, those with a certain type of economic and cultural capital decide where to go, confusing their ability to recognize what they consider appropriate with declarations that must be sanctioned.

Leisure, tourism, and class

One of the elements that interest us is the act of eating as an escape from imposed time, punctuated by everyday life and productivity. The culture of individualism and pleasure has led to the definition of leisure as an occasion for private relaxation, the illusion of a time opposed to that dedicated to work. This division of time was born with the industrial revolution and, to be recognized, must be demonstrated through shared symbols that it is fun and leisurely time – that is, time diverted from the course of heterodirected activity and used to assert one's individuality (Urry; Larsen, 2021).

Contemporaneously with the distinction between leisure time and productive time, we find the first experiences of tourism oriented toward the masses and their mobility. Today, tourism is one of the fiercest neoliberal industries: the phenomenon of mass tourism has had the effect of redesigning spaces (mainly urban) as places emptied of their inhabitants – displaced by rising real estate prices – transforming them into true “non-places,” full of hotels, rooms, tourist restaurants, and bars, retailers of super kitsch gadgets, and sad representatives of local folklore (Semi, 2015). These are the archetypes of mass tourism, despised by the classes with the greatest cultural and symbolic capital, places aimed at economic development which, in exchange for some marketing campaigns about the characteristic elements of their environment and a minimum of logistical organization, ensure a substantial flow of revenue and guarantee the development of a certain induced activity (Kern 2022). However, focusing solely on the negative effects and certain risks of overtourism² is misleading and comforting, as it leads to the belief that the problem can be addressed simply through proper flow management, as proposed by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (D'Eramo, 2017), which treats the issue without taking into account the paradigm of continuous sector growth. The solutions emerging from research on sustainable tourism are based on territorial management organization, which must be capable of evenly staggering visitor arrivals over time and diverting tourists from classic destinations to secondary routes: it is these that interest us, places mediatized as rich in food, wine, and artisanal excellence.

All this, however, brings us back to the framework outlined by Bourdieu (2007). Indeed, a hypothesis for managing tourist flows clearly appears defined by the symbolic space of distinction spreading among tourists, industry operators, politicians, and the media system, and based on a simple class distinction: encouraging wealthy, cultured, and ecological tourism, and rejecting mass tourism (Christin, 2019). Thus, parks, squares, streets, public spaces, and commercial and gastronomic neighborhoods acquire a green-washed, fresh aura, while the clochards, migrants,

² In Portuguese it can be translated as “excessive tourism” or “excess tourism”, understood as a process that produces crises in the primary systems of the places visited (basic sanitation, transportation, etc.).

unassuming presences, and signs of misery must disappear from sight. In this way, cities and territories are gradually transformed into poles of excellence and luxury for selected international audiences (Kern, 2022).

The elements outlined so far allow us to establish the relationships between gastronomy and tourism-related choices, which vary along a spectrum from the most massified to the most elitist. The latter finds one of its strengths in food and wine itineraries built on the semiotic variations and expansions of certain keywords. It would be mistaken to consider these as individual choices or restricted to limited groups: the strength of the tourism economy linked to the gastronomy sector can be observed in the intertwining of public policies that range from (pseudo) identity choices (with various labels of controlled denominations, areas of origin, etc.) to the search for institutional recognition (such as the granting, by various entities, up to the most universal recognition by UNESCO, of certificates and certifications linked to the identification of “intangible heritage”). Therefore, this is no longer a matter of marginal or superstructural elements, but rather the constitution of a productive system that involves the construction of semiotic spaces.

The hypothesis of developing sustainable tourism, however, seems destined to a revolution in consumer publics in a classist sense or, at the very least, to an increasingly clear separation between spaces differentiated by economic and cultural capital.

The articulation of tourist mobility, in this sense, can also be observed in light of the changing idea of leisure time. Originally linked to the phenomenon of the Industrial Revolution, it mainly involved the working class who, from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, claimed a division of time that distinguished between work time, rest time, and time to freely dedicate to other activities (Urry; Larsen, 2021; Hintze, 2020). During almost the entire twentieth century, this latter portion was subject to the development of social policies that, often paternalistically, offered activities capable of developing organized forms of control over the working classes, generally considered dangerous due to their ignorance. To prevent these classes from “wasting” their free time on activities deemed almost immoral, initiatives were developed both politically and corporately, aiming at controlled forms of association among working classes, often with moralistic or pedagogical intent rather than strict entertainment. These ranged from organizing courses, lectures, and traveling libraries to company excursions in a constant contest between a hegemonic idea of culture and that of self-organized entertainment. Institutions and organizations were, in a way, concerned that this leisure time away from work would not be “lost” time.

The leisure time of the masses, therefore, already in the nineteenth century appeared free only in appearance, being guided within the structure of recreational, cultural, and sports associations. Studies in the sociology of leisure developed in

this direction, often concerned with problems of social integration, cultural “uplift,” and controlled entertainment. Studies on mass culture, on the other hand, which clearly developed from the 1930s onward, are often oriented paternalistically and discriminatively toward “popular” audiences, who are always to be educated (Storey, 2015). The system, therefore, mobilized itself to “occupy” the leisure time of the masses.

Today, however, changes in social organization, thanks to digital technologies, force a reformulation of the sociological principles underlying both the interpretation of leisure and mass culture. The media contribute to reproducing and renewing the *habitus*, providing resources for the development of lifestyles and moral orientation. For Stig Hjarvard (2014), the world is undergoing intense mediatization of culture and society that is not limited to the formation of public opinion but crosses nearly all social and cultural institutions. Understanding media as structures that condition and enable reflexive human action, he recognizes that institutions increasingly require media resources, which involve their ability to represent information, build social relations, and gain attention through communicative actions. Hjarvard (2014) argues that in mediatized societies, the extended social environment directly impacts the process of *habitus* formation. Thus, recognition becomes an important mechanism regulating the development of self-esteem and behavior, translating into legitimized lifestyles.

Current social structures, in fact, offer a perspective on leisure mainly as consumption time, where objects of interest are constructed once again along the model of classes endowed with economic and cultural capital (Johnston; Bauman, 2007). Working classes, on the other hand, are increasingly excluded from consumption, although they do not lose their desire for it, considering that their economic conditions depend increasingly on precarious or temporary employment (Sennett, 1999).

Work, therefore, seems to have lost its function of organizing life, while transmedia entertainment often replaces the leisure experience. If we observe a loss of the sensory experience of leisure, we reiterate that it is maintained as a desire, even more widespread, thanks to connectivity. To understand the structure of desire, one can turn to psychoanalytic theories, which view the structuring of subjectivity in Modernity as linked to an original lack, a lack that leads to desire for things believed to be able to fill it, insofar as they are inserted within a capitalist system: the modern subject is formed from deprivation, so that experiences provoking pleasure originate in this “void,” which becomes structure. Two authors propose another hypothesis – the desire that transcends subjectivity because of the capitalist structure, Deleuze and Guattari (2002), who open the possibility of pleasures that are not only unproductive but even alien to any system of production. Thus, it is observed that the Market is constituted in Modernity through the creation of desire.

All the theories exposed so far, from Bourdieu (2007) to Bauman (2016) and Deleuze and Guattari (1995), help to understand the hypothesis of tourist mobility, which, among many offerings, also focuses on enogastronomy as a locus of desire and distinction. In fact, food, no longer understood simply as a necessity or a mere eating habit but as an “experience,” refers to an imaginary linked to the prerogative of elites, even nobility, whose laid tables have always been models of abundance and refined taste.

Inventing Gastronomic Traditions

Currently, Italy is at the center of political disputes about gastronomic “excellence,” whose origins are presented not through a “historical” narrative but a mythical one. Indeed, a true cultural war is underway, involving this country that, for some years, has been developing a tourism industry highly focused on food and wine.

With the introduction of the concept of Intangible Heritage and the patrimonialization of so-called culinary traditions, we can observe the development of this tourism industry in the Italian territory, where there are more than 800 agri-food products with “Geographical Indication,” more than 5,000 “traditional” products, 4 food and wine assets on the UNESCO tangible and intangible heritage lists, 2 UNESCO creative cities of food and wine, 875 “restaurants of excellence,” 114 museums related to “flavor,” and 173 tourist routes defined as “Wine and Flavor Routes” (Garibaldi, 2019).

What is at stake not only in Italy but in many other countries, especially European ones, is the construction of an idea of heritage strongly connoted by nineteenth-century nationalist and identity principles, in which we observe the manipulative use of gastronomy resulting from traditions often invented, eliding history in favor of nostalgic versions of a past that never existed (Bauman, 2020). An example of this is the recent controversy of the current Italian government over the “Mediterranean Diet” as an element of “millennial” national identity, when in fact, it is a concept created in the 1950s by the American doctor Ancel Keys, who observed the benefits of a diet low in meat and animal fats, such as that he found in southern Italy. In reality, this “diet,” which UNESCO declared an “intangible cultural heritage of humanity” in 2010, has little to do with the foods of the much-proclaimed tradition, as it primarily indicates forms of sociability and coexistence and a harmonious relationship with oneself. Food is undoubtedly an essential component of this “regimen,” but it is an exaggeration to recognize in it the promotion of food products such as extra virgin olive oil, so named to meet market formulas (Montanari, 2019).

Smith (2006) calls “authorized heritages” those recognized by government agencies that define them as “things,” places, or events, selecting them for safeguarding a shared past. In the case of the Mediterranean Diet, the inclusion of foods is not so obvious, since historically, in many regions of Italy, especially the North, the use of butter and pork was the basis of the daily diet for many centuries, until much of the twentieth century (Montanari, 2019). In this sense, we are witnessing the instrumental use of a false tradition, played between myth and stereotype, aimed at the musealization of food – a phenomenon that, historically, has always been linked to cultural contaminations and the mobility of people and products, to the point that it is objectively naive – and even useless – to establish “genuinely national” origins.

The famous “Pomodoro di Pachino” is perhaps the most striking example of the invention of narratives about the excellence of Italy’s gastronomic tradition. On Wikipedia³, we find that “[...] it is an Italian fruit and vegetable product with Protected Geographical Indication, originating from parts of the provinces of Syracuse and Ragusa,” therefore a so-called PGI whose origin is presented as Italian. It is a pity that, in this story, even leaving aside the well-known American origin of the tomato, this very product is nowhere near related to genuine Italian tradition. In fact, it was created in 1989 in Israel, at a large company in the field of genetic research in agricultural production, Hazera Genetics.

This idea of heritage represents the hegemonic political discourse about a positive and glorious past that must be transmitted without change, preserved exactly as found, leaving no room for new perspectives and changes. In this discourse, whether tangible or intangible, heritage is always a monument and not a set of cultural values and meanings endowed with a certain “plasticity” (Smith, 2006). Authorized discourse is the process of governing the political and cultural meanings of heritage, while, on the other hand, understood as a cultural process, it would allow a critical view that could facilitate understanding the consequences of establishing things, places, and practices as heritage.

In the case of the Mediterranean Diet, from the moment its heritage meaning is shifted from social practices to its products (among which the Pachino tomato is included), one can see the devastating effects on the possibility of coexistence with the “otherness” of the Mediterranean, which in principle shares many social and convivial habits but does not belong to the semiotic sphere of such a “diet,” unacceptable as a migrant reality. This may become the political use of tradition, authenticity, and genuineness of an intangible heritage we call the Mediterranean Diet.

³ Available at: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pomodoro_di_Pachino. Accessed in: May 10, 2025.

Distinction as a Semiotic Act

The situation we find ourselves in today is one in which the more products are “narrated,” exalted for their authentic, genuine, and traditional qualities, the greater the tendency to standardize them, selling them to tourists in homogeneous environments – true pre-packaged cultural cocoons, replicable and controllable.

Take the concept of the “Central Market,” now present in many cities across Europe, the Americas, and Oceania: these are genuine villages of standardized foods, where we observe the incorporation of the semiotic apparatus of communication at a global level, in a short circuit that distances them from the gustatory and olfactory sensory experience of discovery, bringing them closer instead to the visual and auditory experience of multimedia content, in a close alliance between tourism policies and consumer marketing. The circuit that was built, paradoxically, is no longer one of discovering sensory experiences that lead us to new flavors, smells, and textures, but rather of confirming expectations generated by the transmedia communication system. Case in point? The famous restaurant *The Shed at Dulwich*⁴, a refined, expensive, and exclusive gastronomic phenomenon with hundreds of reviews on Tripadvisor in 2017. The menu⁵ can still be found on the web. However, one unique detail distinguished it: the restaurant never actually existed; it was only an object of communicative semiosis.

This creative “semiotic kitchen” has clearly influenced our relationship with the senses related to food. There are many new actors in this field. In fact, each of us is an actor, a *maître à penser* of gastronomy who possesses, in the digital environment, a new cultural and symbolic capital, not necessarily linked, however, to the real sensory experience of the colorful and appetizing dishes we see. This is a cultural capital that often, and willingly, allows us to distinguish ourselves in the “good taste” of knowledge: we virtually learn the entire gastronomic alphabet only to discover that a photo of the consumed dish is enough to give us recognition, issuing opinions and reviews on the main tourist platforms, such as Tripadvisor or Expedia⁶.

If the noble banquet was a place of distinction, today, gourmet food in its dimension as a semiotics of communication is also capable of generating experiences in the sphere of the tourist spectacle through which, however, we often encounter the concept and the hyper-replicated sensory experience of the “Central Market.” What is at stake is a sensoriality constructed by the very structure of tourism, which organizes from the outset the sensations we seek.

⁴ Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Shed_at_Dulwich. Accessed in: May 10, 2025.

⁵ Available at: <https://www.theshedatdulwich.com/menu>. Accessed in: May 10, 2025.

⁶ Available at: <https://www.tripadvisor.com> ; <https://www.expedia.com>. Accessed in: May 10, 2025.

Communication in the gastronomic sphere weaves meanings arising from political propaganda, economic interests, and mental associations that enter the common imagination. For example, terms such as “typical” and “traditional” have become interchangeable, as have “authentic” and “genuine,” “artisan” and “natural,” depriving foods of their own sensory superstructures and creating the illusion of an “identity” food that becomes a reconstructed memory, a form of defense against the threat of “otherness” (Grandi, 2018).

Let us analyze these keywords in the gastronomic field. The original concept of the artisan is that of an artifact produced by a family business or with a limited number of workers and not serialized. The concept of authenticity comes from the Greek, meaning to have authority, something that has an author. At a recent moment in history, however, authentic began to be associated with the term genuine, which contains the idea of popular, almost a guarantee of quality because it is linked to a popular-rural imaginary that assumes it to be intrinsically good, fair, and clean (Lipovetsky, 2022).

Finally, the concept of tradition: the word shares a root with the Latin verb *tradere*, from which in Italian, both *tradire* (“to betray”) and *consegnare* (“to deliver”) derive, as tradition would. Thus, the ambiguity of “passing on” is present. In the case of tradition, the meaning is positive, expressing the desire for continuity over time. In the case of betrayal, on the other hand, the negative meaning expresses a change of state that gives rise to a new order that subverts the previous one as a consequence of breaking a duty or promise. Thus, tradition, which quickly becomes “authentic” and “genuine” thanks to being transmitted in an “artisan” way, must be preserved continuously as a heritage of collective knowledge and not betrayed by the new that emerges.

Never, as in gastronomy, is a tradition associated with identity roots – those for which we are called to arms if on the horizon we see, along with the danger of the “other,” the need to admit that, above all, we ourselves are “others,” no longer those we continue to claim to be.

The relationship between food and identity has been and still is the subject of many studies and reflections (Ichijo e Ranta, 2016). What are we talking about when we speak of identity? In common sense, identity defines a shared feeling in which we recognize ourselves in relation to something that, on the other hand, does not identify us. It is an attempt to map our position concerning our environment, whether spatial, mental, or temporal – a threshold through which we accept or reject what seems useful for self-representation and the expression of a chain of values. Therefore, we start from the fact that in the act of eating, we express who we are, and we do so by deciding the role food plays, but also by choosing the food we allow to cross a border. The idea of a border is often used for closure, stasis, and exclusion,

while from another perspective, it contains the concept of sharing, proximity, and contact, constantly questioning its own limits.

Regarding the act of eating, we can identify at least two borders:

1) The kitchen is the only part of the house where an intimate relationship is created between host and guest: seeing someone cook means seeing how someone is caring for us. This explains the growing trend of open kitchens in restaurants. The chef used to be in a position of advantage, in the kitchen, from where he could know the behavior of customers thanks to many available signals and waiter feedback, and only rarely did the customer have access to that space and what was happening inside it. In recent years, this boundary seems to have disappeared: on the one hand, restaurants increasingly offer a view of the kitchen, and on the other, technology and cooking shows have decreed their complete disappearance. Observation is now possible from both sides, as if to eliminate any possible unknown or mystery.

2) The use of food as a marker of territorial identity is a well-established commonplace, a misunderstanding that must be carefully reflected upon (Montanari, 2006). It is in this context that “tradition” assumes the distorted meaning of a sacred and immutable place of memory where our “cultural roots” rest, while “ethnic,” in recent years, has come to indicate, in the Western collective imagination, something belonging to minorities or migrants and therefore to be fought against (or welcomed), in a perspective that, in this second meaning, tends toward conservatism in “multiculturalism.”

Media and Gastronomic Desires

Chef’s Table is an American series that premiered on the Netflix streaming service in 2015. The series takes viewers inside the lives and kitchens of some of the most acclaimed and successful international chefs. Each episode focuses on one chef, exploring their life stories, skills, and the ingredients that define their cuisine. The series was nominated eight times for an Emmy and reached its eighth season by 2019. Each episode is dedicated to one chef and narrates their personal philosophies and approach to cooking. David Gelb, the show’s creator, considers it a continuation of his earlier documentary, *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*. Both this documentary and the series use cinematography and production techniques based on traditional films rather than reality show techniques.

It is the narrative that convinces us and makes us participate first and foremost. We can see how each episode is based on a very fixed script:

- 1) Each chef tells how they approached the profession;
- 2) They recount a drama that forced them to rethink their path;
- 3) They explain how they approached national/territorial traditions;

4) They show how they developed their cuisine in an innovative and creative way while also relying on previously well-established traditions.

The narration is accompanied by images of activities inside the kitchen (thus eliminating the boundary with the viewer), the chef shopping at a local market, highlighting their connection to the territory. All of this is interspersed with images of the composition of the dishes on the menu and their final appearance. The script is quite fixed, with few variations. It is aimed at audiences with access to a streaming platform, thus with some purchasing power, but not necessarily enough to consume at the restaurants being marketed. One of the central points of the program is the dynamic relationship between tradition and innovation. It is a narrative developed according to the rules of storytelling.

The use of specific storytelling techniques is seen in the business world as something that produces strategic advantages in market competition, not only in terms of communication (Salmon, 2008), but – and this is what interests us – also in terms of culture. In this sense, narratives constructed through storytelling would allow companies to achieve dominant positions in the universe of symbols and discourses capable of stimulating consumer impulses. We believe that addressing storytelling is important in a reality where culture and tourism are inseparable elements that need to be translated into visitor numbers to places that, until not many years ago, were not part of the already extensive repertoire of places chosen as cultural destinations.

Storytelling is not simply a term that defines the act of telling stories. Its use is defined by a methodology that, through rhetorical principles, generates narratives capable of influencing different audiences who can identify with them. Nowadays, storytelling is widely used by companies, politicians, and economists to effectively promote values, ideas, initiatives, products, and consumption through a disciplinary approach focused on the dynamics of social influence, which in turn, applied to the needs of businesses, consumption, and institutions. Therefore, it is not just about narrating a story, but about stories whose goal is to convince us of ideas and consumption. It is thus related to the sphere of propaganda communication. Storytelling is therefore used in a way that communication involves emotional aspects, aiming to create collective and individual identities that allow people to identify with consumption.

Narratives constructed by storytelling serve to constitute collective and individual memories capable of ensuring behavioral continuity, as in the case of public opinion, through the development of a culture of values and attitudes that reflect in daily life through narrative acts capable of communicating actions and ideas. Storytelling narratives are effective when characters capable of captivating the audience are created, using stories pleasant to hear and able to generate imaginative spaces and, above all, through the use of different channels capable of enhancing the

stories. In this sense, storytelling is more effective when transposed from information technology to multimedia/transmedia platforms.

The word storytelling, as the act of telling a story, has acquired new nuances and meanings, especially transmedia storytelling, which has become the art of telling stories on digital platforms, assuming interactivity and sharing (Vellar, 2015). In a cultural context of media convergence, such as the one we are in, the art of telling stories across different media can be considered the main entertainment strategy of large conglomerates. The expansion of storytelling on different platforms stimulates the creation of synergies between products, thanks to the horizontal integration of entertainment areas in pursuit of content franchise development (brands).

A storytelling narrative is a story that has a beginning, a development, a conclusion, characters, a sequence of events, and a progression of things in motion. A characteristic of these narratives is verisimilitude, while the center of the narrative act is the experience of the storyteller, the one who transforms that experience into a narrative. All story narratives are organized around the desire of an actor to pursue and promote a goal despite existing obstacles and through planning to remove those obstacles.

Final Considerations

In the field of gastronomic and wine tourism, to enjoy food, virtualization is not enough: the materiality of the experience must intervene; it must be effectively “consumed” or “incorporated.” It is at this point, however, that the sensory experience meets frustration linked to the economic factor. The desire for the gastronomic experience is hindered by income barriers, which allow the wealthy classes to maintain distinction. For all others, there remains the unsatisfied desire, the image, and storytelling as the only possible experiences, with the illusion driven by mass tourism realized in the many “Central Markets.”

Thus, to conclude our article, we propose some visual examples that locate the semiotic elements of desire and distinction:

- 1) The restaurant of chef Alex Atala, “DOM,” located in São Paulo, is rated with two Michelin stars. The tasting menu costs about 300 euros per person, excluding drinks: it is the most expensive restaurant in the city;
- 2) “Il Pagliaccio,” another two Michelin star restaurant in Rome, owned by chef Alex Genovese, offers a tasting menu for 200 euros (without drinks);
- 3) The “Osteria Francescana,” located in Modena, run by chef Massimo Bottura, is a three-star restaurant offering a tasting menu for 325 euros, also without drinks.

In these three restaurants, the food is presented as shown in the following photos:

Table 1 – DOM



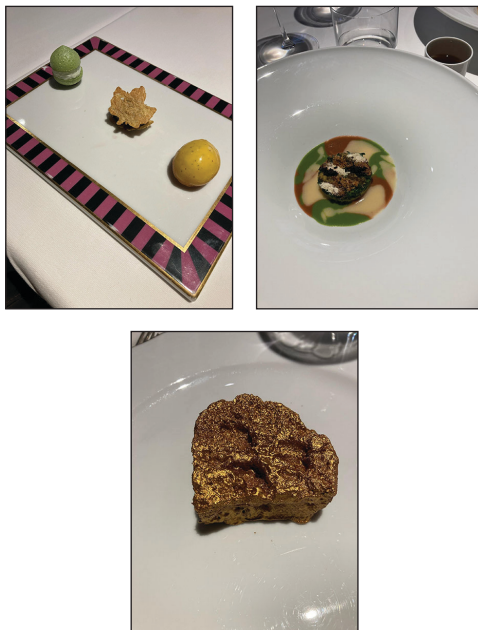
Source: Author.

Table 2 – Pagliaccio



Source: Author.

Quadro 3 – Osteria Francescana



Source: Author.

The presentation clearly shows elements of food as distinguished: large plates with small amounts of food and rare and expensive ingredients (such as powdered gold at Osteria Francescana, or “indigenous ants” at DOM). The question is: is it expensive because it is special, or vice versa? We do not dare to answer, but we offer, as a counterpoint, some photos taken at the “Central Markets,” where we find food for mass tourism:

Figure 1 – Barcelona, Central Market



Source: Author.

Figure 2 – Ribeirão Preto (Brazil), Central Market



Source: Author.

Figure 3 – Madrid, Central Market



Source: Author.

As we can see, the supply comes in large quantities, while the selection is clearly globalized – burritos in Barcelona, ham and cheese in Brazil, piadina (a regional product from Italy) in Madrid, and so on.

Furthermore, we can observe that in expensive restaurants, there are few tables (in some cases, reservations must be made many months in advance), the appetizers are very “discreet,” and the service is personalized: each table receives attention and explanation about each dish from at least two members of the restaurant staff.

On the other hand, the central markets are “mass-centered,” as we can see in the following examples:

Figure 4 – São Paulo: Central Market



Source: Author.

Figure 5 – Florianópolis: Central Market



Source: Author.

Figure 6 – Ravenna: Central Market



Source: Author.

On the other hand, food is a “sign”: this is the case of the tables of great starred chefs or films like *The Menu* (2022), directed by Mark Mylod. The dishes shown in the film were real, made by chef Dominique Crenn, owner of Atelier Crenn (three Michelin stars, in San Francisco since 2016). Although many cast and

crew members were tempted to taste the delicacies between takes, they had to be reminded that the food was primarily props and, therefore, in a way, inedible.

As we can see, the distinction is visible in the small quantity, in “tradition,” and in “local food,” which translates into high prices. On the other hand, we see large quantities of food, globalized food mixed with some local samples, and access to mass tourism due to lower prices.

The social space of taste and cultural practices, therefore, is organized according to the volume and nature of an individual’s capital (cultural and economic). To the extent that the space of taste and cultural practices is socially differentiated and hierarchical, it is imbued with issues of power, cultural practices, and preferences, along with the social position of individuals united by relations of homology, embodied in the unified and hierarchical conception of lifestyle spaces. Globally, therefore, familiarity with gastronomy, which we could call “erudite,” and the denial of popular and mass consumption practices portray the opposition between the dominant and the dominated classes. In this sense, the social space of gastronomy, structured by a hierarchy of tastes and practices, constitutes the space of symbolic domination, based on the internalization of the cultural legitimacy order of preferences, while the media are responsible for legitimizing this space by creating needs through their narratives.

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