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Is Authentic a thing of the Past?

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Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire reports from this year's Oxford Symposium

What is authenticity? Who can define what authenticity really means in the context of food? How do we – or can we ever – know whether a dish or a cuisine is authentic or not, and how relevant is it? How many of today's European food safety laws would be broken preparing an authentic Genoese ravioli recipe (using lamb and calf brains, sweetbreads, spinal marrow and calves' udder, first described by Paganini in a letter to a friend)? Should we do away with the idea of authenticity altogether? Is authenticity an indulgence of the rich that stifles creativity and invention? Is the real battle today whether to cook or not to cook? These are just some of the questions raised at the 2005 Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery.

Colman Andrews, editor in chief of *Saveur Magazine*, freely admitted in his keynote address that he had more questions than answers concerning the authenticity of food debate. In Liguria, he notes, basil pesto is a summer dish; in winter, pesto is made mostly from marjoram or borage. Would eating basil pesto in Liguria in winter therefore be considered an in-authentic activity? Cuisines, like languages, he argues are constantly changing, they are living and evolving. Do we speak authentic English? Latin stopped evolving and died. Food can't be authentic because it is living; even sourdough bread, made using a 200 year old starter will grow differently depending on the various microclimates in which it is produced. There are many levels of authenticity in food: dish level, ingredient level and technology level to name a few. Many of today's 'authentic' dishes or recipes, argues Barbara Ketchum Wheaten, curator of Harvard's Schlesinger library, are like grandfather's axe; he replaced the blade and I replaced the handle. Many variations in regional recipes are the result of culinary plagiarists over the years trying to cover their tracks by making slight changes to a previously published recipe.

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Bee Wilson, Cambridge research fellow and *Sunday Telegraph* food columnist, describes the search of authenticity in food as an arduous and empty exercise when many Americans have never tasted real maple syrup, butter or broccoli. The real issue today, she argues, is getting people to cook in the first place. Author and Middle Eastern food expert, Claudia Roden mourns the fact that people have lost knowledge of their own food, since, for the first time in history, due to a combination of tourism and globalisation, every food is to be found everywhere. Perhaps, it is suggested, that tradition is a better term than authenticity. Fuschia Dunlop, author of Sichuan Cookery, suggests searching for unadulterated food as opposed to authentic food. All traditional dishes, she argues, are hybrids. Chilli came from Mexico to China, most traditional Spanish food did not exist in pre-Columbian times, and isn't traditional Irish cuisine based largely on the potato, a Peruvian import? Fritz Blanc, a chef from Philadelphia, once asked the late chef Louis Szathmáry 'how far should I take the quest for authenticity in a recipe?' the reply was 'stop just prior to the point of indigestion'.

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During the three-day symposium a broad range of papers were presented loosely linked by the authenticity theme. They ranged from Albert Arouh's discussion on food as art in which he applies the aesthetics discourse related to authenticity in art onto gastronomy, to Rachel A Ankey's paper on the rise of molecular gastronomy and its problematic use of science as an authenticating authority. From Bronwen E Bromberger's discussion on the invention of traditional European cheeses 'authenticity is a powerful but problematic claim in a competitive marketplace', to Roger Hadden's paper on the rebirth in Australia of the Scotch oven in which he argues that taste and technology are intimately connected, describing how these ovens embody a cultural knowledge of cookery and taste which guarantees authenticity. Film, architecture, table settings, Philippine vinegars, plagiarism in old cookbooks, deconstructing tradition, ancient Roman cookery and the origin of famous dishes were among some of the disparate topics discussed. During the Cultural Revolution in China, we learn that some restaurants were renamed 'The Red Flag Café' and 'The Present is Superior to the Past'. Dr. Colleen Taylor Sen, from Chicago, tells us that Tandoori Chicken was invented in 1947 and that unlike China who had a restaurant culture for centuries, India had no restaurant culture prior to independence. One reason for this was the caste system; professional cookery is second only to priesthood as the most common occupation of Brahmins. Despite this late start, the Indian domination of English restaurants must be unique in the history of colonisation. You don't see Mexican restaurants dominating Spain!

The Oxford Symposium has been running since 1981 and has a unique magic that draws the world's leading food writers, chefs, philosophers, scientists, anthropologists and historians. The theme for 2006 is 'Eggs' and for 2007 is 'Food Ethics'. More information is available from www.oxfordsymposium.org.uk.

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