

Eating the Other

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Translations of the Culinary Code

By

Simona Stano

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*To each flavour I have tasted and I will taste,
for making me discover the world,
as well as myself.*

To really get to know someone
you should eat, sleep, and travel together.

—Persian Proverb

If we put together many branches and great quantity of leaves, we still cannot understand the forest. But if we know how to walk through the forest of culture with our eyes open, confidently following the numerous paths which criss-cross it, not only shall we be able to understand better the vastness and complexity of the forest, but we shall also be able to discover the nature of the leaves and branches of every single tree.

—Umberto Eco

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FOREWORD

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Along with sex and family life, clothes and dwelling structures, feeding is not only one of the basic material requirements of human life, but also a universal field of expression and culture. Among human beings, there is no such thing as a natural sexual life, a natural kinship or power system, a natural way of covering and protecting our body—and there is no natural nutrition. Certainly there are several physical, ecological, evolutionary, energetic, and biological constraints defining all these systems. However, they are structured and given a precise shape and peculiar functioning mechanisms by specific societies—or, better, cultures. Not only is there no natural “material culture”, but there is no universal one either. Ethnographic evidence clearly shows that the ways of satisfying our physiological needs of protection, feeding, reproduction, etc. radically change in different places and times, even when and where the ecological and biological conditions remain almost unchanged. Nor are decisions concerning these spheres made at an individual level, even though it is evidently the single person who performs in every moment of her or his life the act of choosing clothes, preparing and consuming food, having sex, or living in a family in this or that way. Even if individual behaviour can contradict social rules, the latter always condition the former.

Although some particular rules—for instance, specific food habits—can be explained in a “materialistic way” by ecological constraints, as Marvin Harris suggested, it is very evident that it makes no sense to give such a justification for the fine-tuning of these practices. Could one “materialistically” explain why for centuries in European clothing it was mandatory to wear pants for men, and skirts for women? Or why in Italy and France the traditional breakfast is the continental one (i.e. sweet and mostly consisting of carbohydrates), while in the United States it is generally salty and mostly rich in proteins? It is not necessary here to add other examples for reaffirming a truth that, although being commonplace in anthropological studies, is often left in the shadows in present academic

trends: “material culture” is undoubtedly material, and therefore affected by various physical and biological limits; nonetheless, it is primarily a form of culture, which is therefore particularly important because of its ability to express meaning.

Meaning always has an oppositional character, as Ferdinand de Saussure posited a century ago. It should always be considered as a system of differences. This approach is very general: it applies to every language or semiotic system, and hence also to food. Not only there is no such thing as a natural or a universal food system, but also no system stands alone. In order to be meaningful, every food system should be “ours” and not “theirs”: we cook and eat this way, at this time, in this order, with these ingredients and without those others—because *this* is the polite way, the right recipe, and because *this* food is tasty, while others are disgusting. These oppositions can exist within one society—for instance underlining class, age, or clan distinctions. Or they can mark the boundaries between different societies, different structured layers (for instance, religious) of a society, and different cultures. As for clothing and similar “expressive” semiotic systems, every way of feeding tells us first of all something about the differential identity of the people choosing it. In this sense, nutrition is a self-oriented marker, and an identification device. Definitely, taste is a way to be part of a group.

What is very interesting in this domain in present time is the recently arisen curiosity and appeal for alien food systems. Until almost half a century ago, food systems used to be closed. Everyone was supposed to eat their own way, that is, following the “grammar” and the “lexicon” inherent to their own food system, without looking outside of it—with the only possible exception of “high class” provincial people, who could (or were obliged to) choose the most prestigious “metropolitan” food language of some other societies. Consider, for instance, the French cuisine during the 19th and the first part of the 20th century, when it spread across the aristocratic and official tables, from Sicily to St. Petersburg, from Buenos Aires to Sofia. Of course, changes and loans also affected popular (i.e. local) food systems; but they were slow and had to face a stronger resistance. As it often happened for imported raw materials such as tomatoes, potatoes, maize, tea and coffee, the “new” foods became “traditional” as soon as adopted, in a series of remarkable cases of “invention of tradition”. But these were just new “raw materials”, not new cuisines. In countries with a strong regional or urban tradition, food language remained in fact strongly segregated until very recent times. In the 1950s, for instance, there was no pizza eating (nor pizzeria) in any town of Northern Italy. Then, suddenly (from a historical point of view),

such a seclusion broke down, beginning in big metropolitan centres, where ethnic minorities had mostly maintained their food traditions and opened ethnic shops and restaurants for their own use. In these centres, and gradually even in smaller towns with lower rates of immigration, foreign cuisines suddenly became fashionable, interesting, and tasty. For many reasons some culinary traditions spread more than others (the Chinese one more than the Korean one, the Italian one more than the Portuguese one, etc.), but in principle the interest for eating “as the others do” has progressively enlarged inasmuch as to embrace all food systems.

It is worthwhile to note that such interest is not affecting other layers of the material culture. People are far less willing to wear Japanese kimonos than to eat sushi, or to sit down on carpets with their legs crossed than to eat couscous; far fewer people learn Italian than eat spaghetti, and so on and so forth. A real industry has developed on this attitude: the experience of the “far food” is not only an accidental encounter, but rather the core of industrial catering, specialty restaurants, and luxury services. This is an amazing social fact: food, which is one of the cultural objects more restricted by taboos and prescriptions—most of which we are usually not aware of—, has become the most widely exchanged part of our material culture. Not in the easy sense of “stealing” products or dishes (as Italians “stole” noodles from the Far East, or Americans “stole” pizza, hamburgers, and bagels from Europe). What happened is more radical: German people like Japanese, Italian, or Croatian food to preserve its identity, precisely because it is different, that is, it is not “theirs”, but rather an alien food.

This fact poses an interesting theoretical problem: what happens to this “alien food” when it is produced and consumed in another country, that is, inside a culture that is different from its original one, where all meanings are related with other cultural signs and practices? Undoubtedly, a food system cannot be simply reduced to a set of edible products prepared in this or that way. It is also a series (namely, a syntax) of foods; a peculiar setting of foods on a table (or whatever is used instead of it, be it bread, a leaf, a pot, or any other substance or object); a selection of devices used by diners in order to take their part of food and complete the last operations—e.g. cutting, dressing, or mixing—before eating it; a set of aesthetic rules regulating all these aspects and keeping them together; a series of practices, that is, of ways of making or not making noise, speaking or keeping silent, thoroughly masticating food in the mouth or directly swallowing it, etc.; different timing and relations among the diners, or between them and various types of “outsiders”—i.e. divinities, waiters, etc.; and specific rules of taste (how salty, how warm, ... food should be).

All this is minutely regulated in every culture, even in the most familiar and informal meals. It has a meaning, and it even *is* the meaning. However, it would be very difficult, or in any case extremely artificial, to apply the same set of rules inherent to a certain culture to another one. Even if the material organisation of food were the same as it is in its original context (and in general it is not), its meaning would be very different. Japanese do not “eat Japanese”; Italians do not “eat Italian”. They just eat as usual. The mere fact of eating “ethnic” transforms—perhaps deforms, perhaps transfigures—food. What occurs is not a simple translation process; we could better call it a process of “domestication”. Often food is changed, for lack of ingredients, but also because of the attempt to find a compromise with “local” taste. Moreover, this not only concerns food substances, but also other elements of the food system: settings, timing, devices, and so on and so forth. Although something new is made, it is often presented as “traditional”, thus revealing consumers’ conceptions of what is exotic or authentic. Such a process, which can have many variations, is essential for understanding how cultural encounter and cultural distance work in present-day globalised societies. And it is also very important in order to have an insider look on food meaning and differential nature.

With this book, Simona Stano has done an outstanding research, both theoretical and empirical, on these issues. She studied how a very formalised and grammaticalised cuisine—the Japanese one—has been “domesticated” in various restaurants in different Western countries. More importantly, she investigated the influence of such varied domestications on the aesthetics and the experience of “Japanese food”, also in relation to what was originally theorised in Japanese culture. This study is a remarkable achievement for semiotics of culture, allowing a better understanding of the processes of cultural interdefinition and pushing the semiotic analysis of food to a level of completeness and detail that has few precedents.

PREFACE

“Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are” (Brillat-Savarin 1825). Brillat-Savarin’s aphorism has become very famous and omnipresent, from the many cooking blogs on the Internet to the most popular mass media communications, passing through the prosperous scholarly research on food and taste. In fact, food represents an unalienable component of our life, encompassing different spheres and moments. From the need to nourish our body to the pleasure related to *gourmandise*, from the sharing and transmission of traditional homemade cooking recipes to the world’s most renowned chefs’ formulas, from TV shows to the recently-born phenomenon known as *food porn*, with the addition of many other rituals, techniques, and behaviours, food is at the centre of most of the experiences we live every day. What is more, through it we express our *taste*, that is, both “the sense by which [we distinguish] the qualities and flavour of a substance” (Collins 2014) and our “preference or liking for something” (*Ibid.*) (see also Landowski and Fiorin 1998). At an adequate distance from any kind of determinism, the formula introduced by Brillat-Savarin in his *Physiologie du goût* (1825 [ET 1949]) is therefore still extremely topical in its references to the issue of the relation between food and cultural identity.

Food preferences, taboos, and habits, by revealing our taste, express our identity. Moreover, as we live in an increasingly globalised world, characterised by a number of hybridisation processes, the crossing and overlapping among different “food identities” has become evident and consistent, incessantly relating *identity* to *alterity*. It becomes therefore essential to consider and investigate the links existing between the signs, texts, discourses, and practices concerning the food universe, on the one hand, and the processes of construction and the forms of expression of cultural identity—or, better, *identities*—, on the other hand. But what does dealing with these issues mean? What are the main topics that should be taken into consideration and examined? Which disciplines are more inclined to fit within the scope of such a research? And which methodologies of analysis should be preferred? Clearly, these questions pave the way to a larger debate, recalling different disciplines, methodologies, and perspectives.

For instance, food is a crucial aspect of *religious identity*: from food

taboos to the offerings of specific products to the gods, from the Eucharist host to the Vedic *yajña*, from times of fasting to the episodes narrated by various sacred texts, religion is full of signs, texts, and practices in which food plays a key role. It is essential, therefore, to consider the relation between food and religious identities: how do food-materials become religious signs? Which rituals and practices are related to such a transformation? What are the effects of meaning that it causes? And how to describe and analyse such processes? The same topics could be also addressed with respect to *gender* and *social class* issues, or rather *ethnic identities*, considering food as a “language” unconsciously translating the structure of a particular society or group (Lévi-Strauss 1965). Another interesting field of analysis concerns *taste*, which goes beyond the individual perception, and attains, instead, an intersubjective and sociocultural level. In addition to the gustatory experience, it would also be essential to consider *commensality*, which, beyond the material and physical dimension of food experiences, relates both to the symbolic space characterising them and to the roles and forms related to eating. Finally, much can be said about the *languages* and forms of *communication* referring to the food universe: from cinema and TV shows to various forms of art, from the so-called enogastronomic tourism to cooking blogs, from photography to fashion, from food design to literature, food is at the centre of many discourses that communicate, shape, and analyse it, investing it with multiple values, and inserting it in multiform narrative programmes. What are the traces left by such discourses? And how do such traces and discourses affect our perception of foods and different eating experiences? Finally, what are the mass and new media’s capabilities with respect to the representation of food and taste, and particularly of their cultural dimension? These are just some of the numerous issues that could be addressed with respect to the food universe and which have been partially taken into consideration by different branches of learning, such as, for example, anthropology, sociology, history of food, and in part semiotics. Despite the differences concerning their methodological tools and aims, as well as the peculiarities of the multiple approaches characterising each branch, all these disciplines have several points of connection with regard to the analysis of food-related issues, suggesting the need for complementing and comparing their results and perspectives in a constructive and fruitful dialogue.

Building on these observations, we aim, with this book, to propose a *semiotic* approach to food, meditating on the abilities of different methodologies and theories on meaning-making and sign processes to take part in such a field of research. To this purpose, not only will we retrace

and discuss the theorisations and analyses produced by some of the most prominent exponents in this field, but we will also posit an original research on some issues that have been, so far, mostly disregarded or just very partially taken into consideration by semioticians and scholars from different fields. Without, of course, claiming to be comprehensive or complete, this book hopes to successfully lay the foundations for a proper and autonomous semiotics of food, which we hope will be further “nourished” and developed by future research.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is often difficult to recognise all the ingredients used for the preparation of the dishes brought to the table in order to be enjoyed by eaters. Yet, even without just one of those ingredients, no dish would retain its peculiar flavour. This book makes no exception: I am extremely grateful to many people for the unique taste they added to each page of this savoury research.

First and foremost, I thank prof. Volli, for the tireless accuracy of his inspiring advice, and I thank Ugo, for showing me how the figures of supervisor, colleague, and friend can overlap to the extent of blurring. I thank prof. Danesi, for guiding me through my Canadian studies, and Marcel (but also—and especially—Marcello) for showing me how semiotics can also find expression in the harmonic notes played by the *Semiotones* and in the company of the lovely family surrounding him. I thank prof. Rocci, for his constant availability and helpfulness, and Andrea, for making a not very common recipe possible. Many thanks also go to prof. Leone, for the great help he gave me with the research, and to Massimo, for the enthusiastic smile with which I still remember his first lesson of Semiotics of Culture, whose echo reverberates in these pages and in the way I love to look at the world.

More concise but not less important acknowledgements should be added to this list: I would like to thank my colleagues at the University of Turin and all around the world, and many other scholars and experts who left their mark on my research and academic journey with their advices and suggestions, as well as by providing me with valuable opportunities of collaboration and professional growth.

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INTRODUCTION

This book addresses a phenomenon that is extremely topical as it concerns most contemporary food systems: the *food of the Other*, as the title states. Whether eagerly exalted or strongly criticised, globalisation is a factual characteristic of the contemporary world: the development of new technologies of communication and the advances in transportation have caused a process of international integration and connection, enhancing the interchange and interdependence of world views, products, economic activities, ideas, and other aspects of culture (see in particular Albrow and King 1990; Al-Rodhan and Stoudmann 2006). Such hybridisation processes have increasingly affected food, causing the crossing and overlapping of different foodspheres.¹ Migrations, travels, and communications incessantly expose local food identities to global food alterities, activating interesting processes of transformation that continuously re-shape and re-define such identities and alterities. Ethnic food, moreover, has become a fundamental presence in Western food cultures: from the several *döner kebabs* shops filling up the streets where we walk to the many *sushi* bars and the more and more ubiquitous Eritrean, Senegalese, or Asiatic restaurants, the offer of “the food of the Other” in our societies is extremely broad and varied. Ethnic shops (such as *halal* butchers, Chinese bakeries, or Mexican stores) are increasing in number, and in many city markets the local products are increasingly complemented with spices, vegetables, and other foods required for the preparation of exotic dishes. Furthermore, this same phenomenon has progressively become popular on a wider scale, affecting large distribution chains: in North America and Europe, for example, recent decades have seen the growth of foreign foods on supermarket shelves, sometimes in sections specifically devoted to ethnic food (e.g. soy noodles, Mexican *tortillas*, chilli sauce, spring rolls, or sushi), and sometimes even next to local and more common products (e.g. basmati rice, coconut milk, or exotic fruits).

The aim of this book is precisely to reflect on these phenomena, trying to decipher and analyse the processes of *translation of the culinary code*. What happens to foods and food-related habits, practices, and meanings when they are carried from one foodsphere to another? What are the main aspects involved in such dynamics? And how can semiotics help

understand such processes? These are the main issues we will deal with in the following pages.

Specifically, Chapter One will address a crucial question: why is a semiotics of food needed and useful? Building on the works of some influential scholars, we will point out how food should not be conceived only in terms of a substance used for survival and nourishment, but rather as part of a sign system which is strictly involved in processes of signification. After exploring the details of such an issue, we will propose a brief examination of the main works dealing with food symbolism and the food system. The second part of the chapter will present some of the most renowned contemporary studies concerning food, ranging from taste and recipes to arts and literature, from mass media and cinema to commensality and its roles. Even if such analyses have successfully shown the importance of applying semiotics to food-related issues, we will highlight the need for enhancing and further developing such a field of research. The last paragraph will therefore introduce some hypotheses concerning the role of semiotics within food studies, highlighting the main issues which seem in need to be urgently dealt with and pointing out the need for complementing the more traditional approaches to the new branches focusing on the observation of practices, social dynamics, and other tools of analysis. Moreover, attention will be drawn to interdisciplinarity, recalling the importance of connecting semiotics with other disciplines that have traditionally dealt with food.

Chapter Two will focus on methodology: in order not to get lost in the variety and variability of such a complex phenomenon and such a composite set of methodological approaches, we will proceed with a brief description of the methodologies underlying the research. The chapter will therefore take into consideration the main issues related to semiotics of culture, sociosemiotics, and ethnosemiotics, trying to combine the renowned European tradition with a broader perspective including the contributions given by some of the most prominent international scholars. Special attention will be paid to the inclusion of practices and the concept of textuality.

Chapter Three will introduce the criteria for the construction of the examined corpus, as well as the tools and the structure of the analysis. The ethnic meal will be considered as it is consumed in Western public restaurants, particularly focusing on the dinner and the meal conceived as moments of enjoyment and relaxation. Specifically, we will consider those cases where the quality and costs of the service make it more plausible that the choice of the restaurant (by customers) is not due to economic or practical reasons, but, rather, to a real interest—or even just a sort of

curiosity—in a particular type of ethnic food or eating experience. After clarifying the structure of the research, the main aspects underlying the establishment of the examined corpus will be set, explaining the “what”, “why”, “when”, and “where” that have been taken into consideration for the analysis. The final paragraph will highlight the intention of focusing mainly on the “eater”, that is, more on the side of consumption than that of production, giving priority to the spatial and corporeal dimension.

Chapter Four will deal with the *desk analysis*: the opening paragraph will present the main features of *washoku*, the traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, ranging from ingredients to cooking techniques, from the tableware to the dining environment, from utensils to *umami*. Particular attention will be devoted to chopsticks, which will be analysed through the semiotic lens, comparing them with the common Western cutlery. Afterwards we will introduce another concept that is central not only to *washoku* but, more generally speaking, to the Japanese semiosphere: the so-called “wrapping principle”. We will therefore adopt this idea as a key criterion for the analysis of the Japanese foodsphere, leading to interesting observations as regards to the semantic level. Finally, the last paragraphs will draw the attention to rice, the staple of Japanese cuisine, and particularly to sushi, which is generally recognised as the most representative element of *washoku*. The description of the most common typologies of sushi, including some of its Western variations, will pave the way for their semiotic analysis, where the concept of wrapping will again play an essential role.

Chapter Five will deal with the *field analysis*: six significant case studies, chosen according to the premises discussed in the previous chapters, will be firstly introduced and analysed with respect to their logos and signs, which represent crucial systems of their visual identity. The following paragraphs will draw the attention to the textual dimension of the menu, analysing its linguistic and visual dimension, together with the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic axes, and the level of practices.

Afterwards, we will deal with the analysis of the spatial dimension (Chapter Six): three different levels of observation, detected via “zooming in”, will be described and carefully examined in separate sections. From the macro-level of the eating place and the practices related to it, the analysis will then approach the intermediate level of the table and proxemics, finally reaching the micro-level of plates and food, considered not only in their internal configuration, but also—and above all—with respect to the “techniques of the body” and the practices of the subjects whose images they require, but who, at the same time, modify them. With respect to all these dimensions, we will consider different elements,

ranging from material aspects to visual configurations, narrative dynamics, and proxemic patterns.

Finally, we will present the general conclusions of the research. Building on the results of the desk and field analysis previously exposed, Chapter Seven will offer a semiotic “reading” of the Japanese ethnic meal, opening the way to a discussion concerning the processes of “translation” of the eating experience and a series of crucial theoretical issues, which will be further analysed in the last chapter.

Chapter Eight will therefore posit some epistemological remarks related to the role of semiotics within the field of food studies. Particularly, in reference to what is stated in the first chapters, we will reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, pointing out if, how, and to what extent they have proved to be useful for the different stages of the present analysis. Secondly, we will introduce the main results of the research, moving the focus of attention to the main dynamics underlying translation processes and cultural dynamics. In the end, the still open questions resulting from the research below will be presented, tracing the path for future developments in food-related semiotic studies.

PART I:
SEMIOTICS OF FOOD

CHAPTER ONE

TOWARD A SEMIOTICS OF FOOD²

Chapter One addresses a crucial question: why is a semiotics of food needed and useful? Food is not only something we need for survival and nourishment, but rather part of a sign system which is strictly involved in processes of signification. After exploring this issue, the chapter proposes a brief examination of the main contributions dealing with food symbolism and the food system: paragraph 1.3 is devoted to the main representatives of Structuralism, while paragraph 1.4 deals with the main criticisms toward this approach, introducing the works of the main figures in the so-called Developmentalism. The second part of the chapter presents some of the most renowned and important studies concerning food, ranging from taste and recipes to arts and literature, from mass media and cinema to commensality and its roles. Even if these analyses have successfully shown the importance of applying semiotics to food-related issues, there is still much to do. The last paragraph therefore suggests some hypotheses concerning the role of semiotics within food studies, trying to define the main issues which seem in need to be urgently dealt with (e.g. food hybridisation, globalisation dynamics, translation processes, the role of spatial and corporeal dimensions, etc.) and to point out the need for complementing the more traditional approaches (e.g. structuralism and text semiotics) to the new branches focusing on the observation of practices, social dynamics, and other tools of analysis. Moreover, attention is drawn to interdisciplinarity, suggesting the importance of connecting semiotics with the other disciplines (e.g. anthropology, sociology, history of food, etc.) that have traditionally dealt with food.

1.1. Why a Semiotics of Food?

Eating and food are often compared to language and communication: in *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* Roland Barthes states that food

Is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of

communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior. (1961 [ET 1997], 21)

Anthropologically speaking, food is undoubtedly the primary need. Nevertheless, as the French semiologist states, this need is highly structured, and it involves substances, practices, habits, and techniques of preparation and consumption that are part of a system of differences in signification (*Ibid.*, 21-22). Once satisfied, therefore, the first human need “develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviors, and it is precisely for these reasons that it is a sign” (*Ibid.*, 25).

In this sense we can talk about a *semiotics of food*: far from simply coinciding with material needs or physiological and perceptive processes, nutrition concerns all the activities, discourses, and images that surround and are associated with it (Pezzini 2006). Food is not only a substance for survival and nourishment; it is also part of a sign system, since it is strictly involved in processes of signification and interpretation.

1.2. Edible or Non-Edible? *This is the question...*

The first aspect that shows how strictly food is related to semiosis is the distinction between what is edible and what is not. According to the French social scientist Claude Fischler (1980; 1990), one of the peculiarities of human beings’ relation to food is the so-called “classificatory thinking” (*pensée classificatrice*). Every culture selects, within a wide range of products with nutritional capacity, a more or less large quantity destined to become, for such a culture, *food*. In Thailand, Cambodia and many Asian countries people consume larvae, locusts, and other insects. In Peru it is common to eat hamster and llama’s meat. In Africa and Australia some tribes consume snakes. By contrast, these same habits would probably sound odd, or at least unfamiliar, to European or North American inhabitants. As mentioned above, human beings eat, first of all, to survive. But in the social sphere, food gains meanings that transcend its basic function and affect perceptions of edibility (Danesi 2004, 194).

Some scholars have tried to connect the process of distinction between edible and non-edible to more or less functionalist and materialistic theories. The best-known approach is Marvin Harris’ *cultural materialism*, according to which “human social life is a response to the practical problems of earthly existence” (1979 [2001], XV). In *Good to Eat: Riddles of Food and Culture* (1985), the American anthropologist presents