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# Extra Virgin Olive Oil and Slow Food

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**Abstract:** Extra virgin olive oil is a commodity which enjoys particular prestige in the globalized economy. It is a “healthy” fat that is identified with localized production by artisans. Accordingly it reverses the erasure of the connection between human subjects that characterizes the fetishized commodity. Extra virgin olive oil from Tuscany is particularly prestigious and expensive, being associated with a region famed for its art, architecture, food, and landscape and widely popularized of late by British and American writers. The preference for artisanally produced commodities like extra virgin olive oil is linked to the growing “Slow Food” Movement which seeks to replace mass produced, artificial and sometimes tasteless fast foods by wholesome foods produced in known places by identifiable people. Slow foods which can be consumed at leisure reflect the superior taste of purchasers. Despite Slow Food’s championing of small producers, it is often the big firms rather than families of artisans that are able to access international markets.

**Keywords:** Globalization, non-fetishized commodities, “Slow Food” Movement, critique of mass production, olive oil, Tuscany

**Résumé :** L’huile d’olive, en tant que marchandise, jouit d’un prestige particulier dans l’économie mondiale. C’est un «bon» gras qui rime avec production locale et artisanale. En tant que tel, cette huile annule l’effacement du lien entre les sujets humains qui donne un caractère fétiche à la marchandise. L’huile d’olive extra-vierge de la Toscane est particulièrement prestigieuse et coûteuse puisqu’elle est associée à une région réputée pour son art, son architecture, sa nourriture et ses paysages rendus célèbres récemment par des écrivains britanniques et américains. L’attrait des marchandises produites de façon artisanale, telle l’huile d’olive extra-vierge, est lié au mouvement «slow-food», qui cherche à remplacer la nourriture artificielle issue de la restauration rapide, produite en série et parfois insipide, par de la nourriture saine produite par des personnes identifiables dans des endroits connus. Cette nourriture, qui peut être consommée à loisir, reflète les goûts supérieurs des consommateurs. Malgré les succès de quelques petits producteurs de «slow food», ce sont plus souvent qu’autrement les grandes compagnies et non les familles d’artisans qui sont en mesure d’accéder aux marchés internationaux.

**Mots-clés :** Mondialisation, marchandises non-érigées en fétiche, mouvement «slow-food», critique de la production en série, huile d’olive, Toscane

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In a recent visit to a Korean greengrocer down the street from my home in Toronto, I went to reach for the Asian hot sauce, only to find that it had been dropped to a lower shelf in favour of a higher-end competitor: the increasingly ubiquitous extra virgin olive oil. Indeed, hot sauce had all but been replaced with at least ten varieties of extra virgin olive oil, with fancy Italian labels and price tags to match, mimicking the stock of the expensive gourmet store across the street. More than an average shopping crisis, this moment made me ask the question of how olive oil, a “healthy” fat, but a fat nonetheless, could make such a positive mark on a public obsessed with fat and fitness. Indeed, well before greengrocers took up this trend, at one moment in the not-too-distant past, butter seemed to vanish from higher-end restaurant tables, replaced by small dishes of olive oil. This move reveals a kind of key shift in what Simmel (1994) would call a “sociology of the meal,” or perhaps, more aptly, a “sociology of a hip meal.” These scenes epitomize how a commodity—extra virgin olive oil—can move across borders, in the company of diverse cultural and class assumptions and practices. The study of these flows of olive oil illuminates wider issues of culture and class in the commodity-saturated world of contemporary capitalism.

As Stallybrass notes, Marx was concerned with “a specific form of fetishism which took as its object not the animated object of human labour and love but the evacuated non-object that was the site of exchange” (1997: 187). Relations between subjects in capitalist production come to be misapprehended as relations between objects. This misapprehension, as has often been noted, is real in its consequences, erasing the connection between producers and consumers. In what Harvey calls “the condition of postmodernity,” the world’s geographies are being brought together via the circulation of food commodities to be experienced vicariously and simultaneously as a “simulacrum” yet the social relations of production, producers and place of origin of these commodities are still

erased from the view of the consumer (1990: 300). However, what makes Tuscan extra virgin olive oil such a successful commodity is its craft or non-industrial production; the location of production, the producer's estate, remains embedded in the product. In this respect, the "source identifying indexicals"<sup>1</sup> of craft production, seem to seek to overcome the fetish. Extra virgin olive oil is, at least rhetorically, "de-fetishized" in that the identity of producer remains immanent in the product.

As Mintz (1985) argues, the making of a dominant commodity depends on markets of consumers—the cultivation of particular tastes—as well as production. Is consumption of extra virgin olive oil an example of consumers' resistance to the erasure of the producer that so vexed Marx? Italian extra virgin olive oil producers produce, package and market their oil in ways that are not unrelated, I argue, to the way in which North American consumers imagine and desire it. As well as investigating how extra virgin olive oil is produced and marketed in Tuscany, I consider how consumer imaginings and consumer movements might affect the way in which production of food commodities is carried out. I focus specifically on an international movement, *Slow Food*, which advocates, instead of the hurried intake of industrial fast food, the leisurely consumption of artisanally produced food.

## Commodities on Display

On my way to Italy to interview extra virgin olive oil producers, I used a stopover in London to visit Harrods' famed food floor, in hopes of gaining insight into how Italian extra virgin olive oils are marketed abroad. I found four substantial olive oil displays. One four-tiered display drew my attention. Although the Harrods brand of olive oil was given the prestige place at eye level, the estate oils from Tuscany immediately followed it. Greek, Spanish and South African olive oils were on a lower tier; and, lowest of the low, at my feet, the mass-produced oils, like Fry "Light" cooking spray and Mazola corn oil. The upper tiers of the hierarchy are ordered by the relative prestige of the known and acknowledged, de-fetishized olive oil: from the claim of the Harrods brand to be the best, to the prominence of Tuscany over all others, European over non-European. Finally there is the move from olive oil whose place of origin is known to "placeless, nameless" oils, which have not been "de-fetishized." The normal form of the commodity provided a lowly background against which the defetishized commodity stood out as the prestigious figure.

Fascinated by this hierarchy, I took detailed notes on each of the labels. As I happily scribbled away, I began to notice two very large men in very expensive suits, remind-

ing me of dapper English gangsters. They circled around me, carrying on a loud conversation while watching me closely. Finally, it dawned on me that their behaviour suggested they were security men and my behaviour might look suspiciously like industrial espionage. I turned around, and with business card in trembling hand, introduced myself as an anthropologist. They were mystified, as many have been, as to what an anthropologist wanted with olive oil, so I gave them a breezy account of changes in anthropological topics—from far away places with palm trees to global commodities! I must have persuaded them that I meant no harm because one of them was soon extolling the healthful qualities of olive oil, and pressing the name of his favourite Tuscan olive oil on me.

## Reverse Orientalism?

In contemporary global cultural economies, olive oil's reputation as being healthy provides this commodity with a medico-scientific boost. In popular discourses about health, concerns about heart disease led to the promotion of the "Mediterranean diet" which stars a "good" fat, olive oil. This does not answer the question, of course, about why Italian, or particularly Tuscan olive oil would be favoured, not only by Harrods' plainclothesmen, but by North American consumers as well.

It is now commonplace to note the connections between imaginings of particular places and political and economic relationships in the world, including the circulation and consumption of commodities. So argues Edward Said regarding the impact of Orientalist discourses (1979) in perpetuating negative images of the Middle East, which are both shaped by, and shape, political and economic policies. This kind of analysis proposes that the way in which political and economic relationships interact with popular imaginings of place—presented in books and other media—is not trivial or coincidental. Crucial to the process of imaginary de-fetishizing is being able to imagine the place of production. In a kind of radical reversal of the negative imaginings that characterize the Middle East, where I have formerly worked, we find Italy, particularly Tuscany, presented as an overwhelmingly positive space in many popular texts. These texts provide fuel for lively and picturesque imaginings of a place like Tuscany, to which the lineage of desired commodities like Tuscan extra virgin can be traced.

One recent bestseller, *Under the Tuscan Sun*, for example, recounts Frances Mayes's vacation life in Tuscany, where she bought and renovated a house. The back cover of the book claims that Frances Mayes has done for Tuscany what M.F.K. Fisher and Peter Mayle have done for Provence.<sup>2</sup> While Italian olive oil producers I spoke to

reported that they found the book often saccharine, inaccurate and boring, they argued that it had had a positive impact on the tourist trade, increasingly important to the local economy.<sup>3</sup> Mayes depicts Tuscany as a place where the quest for the authentic food, wine and aesthetically pleasing traditional villas are the chief concerns of existence. Perhaps that is why her book is so popular, as it seems to engage the reader in an idyllic, yet “authentic” space, implicitly rendered timeless by her use of the present tense. In an article entitled “Why I Hate Frances Mayes” Paula Brooks (2001) wonderfully lampoons the romantic “life is a banquet” portrayal of Tuscany, where the worst crisis seems to be something like forgetting to buy fresh ricotta. The market for these books, however, has seemingly yet to be sated. A new memoir by Patrizia Chen (2003) entitled *Rosemary and Bitter Oranges: Growing Up in a Tuscan Kitchen*, follows Mayes’s format of offering descriptions of beautiful and succulent local produce, descriptions of quaint Italians devoted to food, and the authentic recipes of her Italian housekeeper. The commodification of Tuscany itself depends on foreign imaginings of it as a desirable place. This process is not unrelated, I suspect, to the relative marketability of Italian olive oil, as opposed to the also delicious and healthful Mediterranean olive oils of Palestine, Tunisia, Syria, Libya or Turkey.

Desires for Tuscany have been generated from abroad in the popularity of Italian cuisine itself, in its sophisticated and rustic forms.<sup>4</sup> One gets the sense that Italian cuisine has taken over from French as the most influential European cuisine in North America; an issue of *Bon Appetit* (May 2001) claimed that Italian cuisine was the favourite cuisine of 71% of Americans. Pasta, olive oil and Parmesan cheese are prominent in middle-class North American diets. Indeed, basil pesto on pasta is practically the pemmican of the harried, but cuisine conscious, middle-class working parent. Italian cuisine early in the century inhabited a different class location, and in some respects was the “industrial food” par excellence as witnessed in the canned spaghetti of Chef Boyardee and the epitome of fast food, pizza.<sup>5</sup> This fact is somewhat haughtily noted by Lorenza de’ Medici in her cookbook (1996: 16) presenting Tuscan aristocratic cuisine (*cucina alto borghese*). But *la cucina povera*, poor rural people’s cooking is equally fashionable these days, with its emphasis on simplicity and seasonal produce (Kaspar, 1999: 24.) Food writer Calvin Trillin somewhat theatrically suggests that Tuscan trattorias, which feature “homey, unpretentious, honest” food,<sup>6</sup> are now more common in Manhattan than delis (2003: 17-8). And the Tuscan cooking school is the role model for the increasingly popular cooking vacation in which culture is

imbibed through local food products and cuisine (Ferguson, 2003: 8).

Tuscan cuisine has also received much attention in “foodie” magazines. A Special Collector’s Edition of *Bon Appetit* magazine (May 2000) entitled “The Soul of Tuscany: Fascinating People, Romantic Places, Delicious Foods,” features an editorial introduction entitled “Dreaming of Tuscany” where the editors announce:

This is the Italy of our dreams—the magical region we have read about, seen in paintings and fantasized about. We can visualize it in our mind’s eye—the olive groves, cypress trees and grapevines; the medieval villages, walled towns and Renaissance cities.

It is the land of Florence, Siena and Lucca; of the Uffizi and the Leaning Tower of Pisa and more duomos than we can count. It is the home of Dante, Galileo, Machiavelli, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Puccini, and, yes, Gucci. And then there are the wines and the food. What would life be like without Chianti, Brunello, Vin Santo or the Super Tuscans? Or crostini, biscotti, pecorino, pappardelle and panforte? Not to mention olives and olive oil. (2000: 115)

This is “imagined cuisine” (Bestor, 2001: 85) at its most positive. This edition of *Bon Appetit* features an article by Frances Mayes, who writes “At each season, different foods are welcomed, savoured and honoured—and then the next thing comes into its prime. It’s a continuing pleasure cycle. In spring, Tuscans appreciate young fava beans, green almonds, wild asparagus, fresh pecorino” (2000: 117). I suspect that the consumption of Italian extra virgin olive oil, in its premium form, is related to this current fascination with Tuscany as a prestigious vacation destination and with the popularity of Tuscan cuisine. But while place of production is clearly important in consumption, so to is the way in which the commodity is produced and the producers themselves.

## Tuscan Olive Oil Producers

I wanted to see how the producers of extra virgin olive oil both produced their products and imagined consumers for it. To this end, I interviewed several producers of extra virgin olive oil in the summer of 2000. I present here vignettes describing three of these producers, each from different classes: owners of an olive mill who identified themselves as former sharecroppers; owners of an internationally renowned vineyard, for whom olive oil was a secondary product to wine; and the aristocratic owners of a large olive oil estate. What united all of these very differently located olive oil producers was a shared love of extra virgin olive oil, a commitment to its artisanal pro-

duction and a claim of the superiority of the extra virgin olive oil made in this fashion. All the producers I interviewed agreed that olives must be picked by hand between mid-November and mid-December in order to retain the low acidity (the olives produce more acid as they ripen) and the distinctive greenish colour and peppery taste of a Tuscan oil.

Central Italy, including Tuscany, has long been a communist party stronghold and land reforms have redistributed land (Shore, 1990). Yet vestiges of the traditional land tenure system (*mezzadria*), although abolished after World War II, continue to structure social interactions as well as the production and marketing of olive oil.<sup>7</sup> In the past, the sharecroppers (*contadini*) worked the land of the owner (*padrone*), to whom they gave at least half of the produce. An overseer (*fattore*), the intermediary between the landowner and the *contadini*, managed the farm. While the *mezzadria* system of land tenure in Tuscany has largely died out, the hierarchical relationships between *padrone* and *contadini* are still palpable in everyday comportment. Traces of the *mezzadria* system also remain in olive oil production. The olive pickers, often the former *contadini* on large estates, are paid with a share of the olive oil produced, despite EU regulations that technically forbid it.

One sunny June day, I interviewed the owners of a family-run mill, which was situated next to their large, new, but plain farmhouse. Three generations were present: the old patriarch, the middle-aged son, and 10-year-old grandson. The son did most of the talking while his father sat, interjecting humorous commentary, and the little boy wandered about until he became bored and vanished. I had been introduced by a mutual friend, who told them that I was familiar with the place of the *contadini* in the *mezzadria* system. This appeared to please them, for while they now owned the land they worked thanks to the dismantling of the *mezzadria* system, they still identified themselves as *contadini*.

This family operated one of the few traditional mills left in the Cortona region. They proudly showed me the enormous stone wheels used for grinding the olives into a paste. They told me that horses, then steam and now electricity had first powered the wheels. The wheel itself was the guarantor of "authenticity" since there was plenty of new technology in evidence, including a new conveyor belt which washed the olives and a machine which lifted the 30 kilogram discs spread with olive paste, a task very few men could still do. The other marker of authenticity was the "cold" pressing. The olive paste is kept at 17 degrees Celsius as it is pressed. This method was contrasted to "hot" processing when the olive paste is not

pressed at all, but put in a centrifuge with hot water. The hot water method produces more oil, but according to my hosts, the aesthetic qualities, the smell and taste, and the healthful qualities, the nutrients and vitamins, are lost. This method of cold pressing is slower, more labour intensive and produces less oil, but it preserves the quality of the oil. As I was offered a taste of their indeed delicious oil straight from the *ziri*, a large and attractive terracotta pot, the old man waxed philosophical. He told me that contemporary consumers who bought their oil from the supermarket did not understand that if we still have the same stomach as "Christo" (Jesus Christ), then we should eat natural things. This family perceived their extra virgin olive oil to be in competition with the much cheaper but highly processed olive oil sold by multinationals, which fooled customers, he said, by bottling bad oil in nice bottles. He told me that industrially produced olive oil was weakening Italian men and if they kept on consuming it, Italian women were not going to be happy. With a mischievous grin, the old man made a descriptive hand motion that clearly indicated that he was talking about their sexual strength.

In olive picking and production, instead of workers selling their labour for a wage, there is often more of a barter (*baratto*) system, where, in the words of one of my informants, "you give something to me, I do something for you." The millers gave a percentage of the oil to the pickers, who were friends and acquaintances, instead of paying them a salary.<sup>8</sup> Those who bring their olives to this mill to be processed give the mill owners a share of their oil instead of paying them, who then try to find markets for the oil.

The mill owners bottle their own oil in a clear glass utilitarian bottle, with a plain label that describes their farm and production style. They asked me if, for a percentage of their oil, I might like to be their wholesaler in Canada, as without connections, English skills, or international experience, they had had difficulty in selling their oil abroad. I demurred, although I momentarily savoured the appealing thought of dispensing olive oil to friends and colleagues from an elegant terracotta vat!

The next estate I visited is described in *The Food Lover's Companion to Tuscany* as "what you would think of if you closed your eyes and imagined a quintessential Tuscan wine estate" (Capalbo 1999: 261). This estate is the Tuscan face of an international company with a wide distribution network. The sons of the owners and other professional experts head up the various marketing divisions. I spoke with one of the sons, a sophisticated and immaculately dressed young man, with impeccable Oxbridge English, who was responsible for the marketing of olive

oil, champagne and finely crafted Tuscan hunting knives. We chatted in the beautiful gardens, surrounded by elegantly restored buildings, complete with a charming covered terrace where they held their wine tastings. When I asked if they paid their workers in kind, I received the firm reply that their pickers were full-time, year round, and legally paid. After the relatively short olive picking season in the late fall, the workers were occupied with wine production, this estate's chief concern and income earner. He told me that they produced extra virgin olive oil for the pleasure of it, because they did not make much money from it. He said that the advantage of selling olive oil for wine producers is that the bottles tend to hang around in people's kitchens, providing a discreet form of everyday advertising, especially persuasive, he thought, because they bottle their oil in replicas of a classic Roman *anfora*. Instead of milling their own oil, he said, they send it to a nearby mill, owned by those known to them, who could be trusted to mill it properly. I was surprised to hear that it was the mill of the former *contadini* family described above. But these wine makers did not have to ask the anthropologist for marketing assistance as their oil is readily available at expensive gourmet food shops in North America.<sup>9</sup> Despite identical production of extra virgin olive oil, the wine estate easily distributed its olive oil abroad while the mill owners could not access a foreign market.

The third olive oil producer I'll discuss is a count, and a member of the elite olive oil producer collective known as "Laudemio." In 1992, Laudemio produced an elegant and expensive hard cover volume that pictured the aristocratic owners on their remarkable estates as well as recipes featuring Laudemio oils contributed by film notables like Franco Zeffirelli and Audrey Hepburn. This count's estate proved even more impressive than its picture in the Laudemio catalogue. As we toured their capacious olive oil fields in their SUV, the count and countess noted that even though one of their wines had won an award a few years ago, their primary product was olive oil. The olive trees were impeccably cared for and the count's affection for them was evident when he made a special point of taking us to see a huge old tree that had somehow survived the terrible frost in 1985, when many Tuscan olive groves had been devastated. Like the mill owners, these aristocrats also relied on workers from the area, many of whom had had long-standing ties with their family, to pick their olives in return for a share of the oil. Their old mill had been immaculately restored as a kind of museum. The countess told me that one of their aged former *contadino* had been moved to tears when he saw the restored original olive press. While the countess

decried the harshness of the *mezzadria* system, she noted that in olive picking season, these old ties, and shared affection for the oil, seem to evoke nostalgia for the past. The count and countess pick olives alongside the ordinary folk of the neighborhood and the class divisions seem more muted at this time.

While the *fattore* of the past was often a harsh mediator between the owner of the farm and the workers, the present day *fattore* on this estate is an olive oil tasting expert, part of a new cadre of agricultural and taste-making experts. Their old farmhouse (*podare*), which used to house the extended family of the *fattore*, has been transformed into five apartments for a kind of "agricultural tourism" (*agriturismo*). The guests get a chance to experience "country living" and participate a bit in farm production. The old olive mill has been filled with large round tables where the students in their cooking school will eat. They often rent out their remarkable gardens to locals for social events like weddings; the wedding lunch will be catered in the old olive mill. The non-elite borrow some aristocratic cachet by having their wedding photographs taken with the backdrop of the noble estate. These are all ways in which the aristocracy, who have far less land than they used to, continue to afford their luxurious lifestyle for the reform of the *mezzadria* system has not entirely eroded class distinctions.

The Laudemio group provides promotion and screening for all of its 40-some members. To be sold as Laudemio, extra virgin olive oil must be filtered until it is a clear, brilliant green. Each estate bottles their oil in Laudemio's signature bottle, affixing their own distinctive estate labels. Every year each estate's oil is tested to see if it meets Laudemio standards. If it does not pass, they cannot sell Laudemio oil that year. While Laudemio was a good vehicle for promotion, the count told me, they don't actually make a lot of money from it, given the expense of the bottle and the cork.<sup>10</sup> Most of the oil they sell is unfiltered, since most of their customers prefer the peasantry look of the unfiltered oil. The Laudemio group does not handle distribution, so Laudemio producers like Antinori and Frescobaldi, who have prominent wine distribution systems, are much likelier to get their oil marketed abroad (Rosenblum, 1996: 116).

### Asserting Local Identities

One must investigate both production and consumption to understand how extra virgin olive oil circulates from its production in Tuscany to North American consumers. The trajectory of its circulation may well have to do with the way in which contemporary lives are lived in conditions of postmodern capitalism. The aestheticization of local

places goes hand in hand with the internationalism of modernism, as David Harvey notes; the fashioning of a localized aesthetic allows a sense of limited identity that endows a sense of security in a shifting world (1990: 303-304). As this process accelerates, local identities are formed and embodied in particular consumables representing particular places. Tuscan extra virgin olive oil is a case in point. Food items increasingly provide an idiom in which concerns about the European Union are expressed and argued (Lem, 1999, Leitch, 2000). Europeans often negotiate, contest and oppose the European Union as an increasingly bureaucratized body that will undermine local produce, local standards of production, and impose a uniformity which will both deprive local production of its taste and style and perhaps expose some to dangers from other nations. This phenomenon has been well publicized in the uproar about *Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy* (BSE or mad cow disease) and genetically modified foods. Lem's work (1999: xi-xii) describes how French producers of wine see themselves as being undermined by the EU regulations that allow sale of foreign products perceived to challenge local production.

The EU regulations for olive oil production seem to have both restricted and enabled production and marketing strategies: while the olive oil producers that I interviewed seemed jaded about the EU in general, they also receive subsidies from the EU, based on the number of trees and area planted. These subsidies are hardly enough to offset the labour costs, if EU standards are followed. One of my informants dismissed this aid as hardly enough for a "cappuccino per tree." The producers I spoke with argued that the EU restrictions on labour and hygiene actually benefited the larger industrial producers over those committed to high quality production.

Extra virgin olive oil is one of the food commodities which is beginning to stand for—affectively and materially—a kind of local identity which may assert a resistance to the incursion of both foreign and mass produced goods. In the tourist promotional material celebrating the "Oil Towns" (Citta dell'olio) of Tuscany and Umbria a message aimed at consumers is that by buying and imbibing the locally produced olive oils, they get a share in the local landscape and gastronomic traditions (Papa, 1998).

## Slow Food

The idea that one can access a kind of cultural authenticity via local food is promoted by a prominent international movement, *Slow Food*, which takes as its stated project the encouragement of local food produced by "centuries-old traditions" in an attempt to counter the incursion of fast food and mass-produced food. The movement's

founder, Carlo Petrini, formerly a prominent figure in the Italian left, was inspired by the appearance of that controversial icon of food globalization, the first McDonald's, in Rome. Regional cooking, according to Slow Food, is said to "banish" the degrading effects of fast food. And "real culture" is described as being about "developing taste" rather than "demeaning" it through consuming industrially produced food.

Slow Food has become a popular forum for discussing shared problems with globalization through the medium of food. Its message clearly resonates with consumers in many parts of the world who fear the dangers associated with industrial food production: the additives, the unknown origins, potential genetic modifications and the homogenization of tastes. The foods that one ought to acquire a taste for and enjoy, according to Slow Food, are those artisanally produced and locally grown. Through consuming this kind of distinctive food, one can support the artisanal food production that is in danger of being wiped out by competition with industrial food companies, and connect with the people who produced it and the land on which it was produced.

Corby Kummer, food critic for *The Atlantic*, contributor to *Gourmet Magazine*, and advocate of the Slow Food movement in the United States, highlights the three initiatives, "embedded in the Slow Food DNA" (2002: 22). The first is the "Ark of Taste": Slow Food rescues "endangered foods" by sponsoring them and encouraging its members to consume them and thus save them from extinction. This biblical image is used by Slow Food to link gourmets with environmentalists, arguing that ignoring the linkage between the two leads to "stupid gourmets." "The Ark metaphor is explicit: onto this symbolic ship, Slow Food intends to load gastronomic products threatened by industrial standardization, hyperhygienist legislation, the rules of the large-scale retail trade and the deterioration of the environment (<http://slowfood.com>). The second initiative is the Presidia, grassroots organizations that identify and promote local Ark foods to the public. The third is the "Nobel Prize" of biodiversity, the Slow Food Award (Kummer, 2002: 22).

These initiatives suggest a kind of "virtuous globalization" is possible through a practice of eco-gastronomy, in which the pleasure one derives from artisanally produced food comes with an obligation to consume responsibly. Slow Food's Web site and publishing house, the Slow Food Editore, produces elegant and attractive volumes that show an attention to aesthetics and quality which mime the virtues they find in the foods they champion. Yet it is also a powerful "platform" for publicizing their movement, a platform that, like a cooking show or three Miche-

lin stars for a French restaurant, is seen as increasingly necessary for success in the gastronomic endeavors (Echikson, 2003: 65). Slow Food is clear about the power of their platform, which they use to support and promote their “endangered foods.” Slow Food posits, rather uncritically, the unambiguous “goodness” of food biodiversity, but only those “traditionally produced foods” which are tasteful according to Slow Food’s experts, are deemed worthy of inclusion on the Ark.<sup>11</sup>

Like the Arts and Crafts movement spearheaded by Morris and Ruskin in 19th-century England in response to industrialization, Slow Food is a response to a perceived loss of core human values as a result of globalization. The solution for the many stresses of life in a condition of post-modern capitalism, according to the The Slow Food International Manifesto, ratified by 20 countries in 1989, is: “sensual pleasure and slow, long-lasting enjoyment.”

Slow Food articulates a number of critiques of contemporary life under the conditions of late capitalism. They oppose the hectic pace of contemporary capitalism. They resist the homogenization, anonymity, and placelessness of industrialized food production, championing the distinctive and personalized artisanal production in its stead. They excoriate the quick and solitary consumption of mass-produced foods, devoid of conviviality.

On the surface of things, Slow Food’s goals seem unimpeachable. They seem to connect an emancipatory politics of the body (the right to pleasurable and healthy eating) with a politics of the global (saving biodiversity for the good of the environment), a goal which many, including David Harvey (2000) might argue is a positive move for social transformation. Many of the critiques they offer echo those of many critics of capitalism. The Slow Food movement’s symbol is a snail, an “amulet against speed.” Here we see echoes of themes and concerns familiar to us through Marx and E.P. Thompson’s critiques of the profound difference in time reckoning in capitalist regimes, where wage labour structures the day and regiments the bodies of the workers into a breakneck pace of repetitive movements so wonderfully lampooned by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. Slow Food seems to address in particular the conditions of postmodern capitalism, with the “time-space” compression that produces a frantic and overstimulated “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1977). What Harvey calls time-space compression, Slow Food calls the “insidious virus: Fast Life” which forces us to eat fast food. Slow Food urges us to literally slow down, to take pleasure in the selection, preparation and consumption of food, to cultivate one’s taste for distinctive products, hence supporting the producers of these distinctive local products. “If you have a good time while you

eat, the movement argues, you’ll have better meals. And a better life.” (Kummer, 2002: 18). In Slow Food’s critique of fast food and fast eating, I hear echoes of Mintz’s (1985) analysis of sugar becoming so central in working-class diets because of its convenience for wage-labour schedules. Sugar became a “proletariat hunger killer” which, like fast food, replaced nutritionally sounder food whose time consuming preparation did not fit into capitalist work schedules. Slow Food urges the leisured and meticulous preparation of natural foods and its consumption in a convivial manner as a way of combating the demands of work and time in the contemporary world.

However, Slow Food has less to say about assumptions about class and gender that implicitly buttress the movement’s touted lifestyle. There is silence on the fact that unless the workday is altered, the slow preparation of food may be impractical or an added burden, presumably for women. One of the recipes included in the Kummer volume promoting Slow Food is for *testaroli*, a crepe dish, which is rarely eaten in Italian homes these days because of the considerable preparation time required. Florentine women, according to anthropologist Carol Counihan, feel ambivalent toward giving up their central role in food preparation because of work outside of the home, as the lunch break, when Italians used to have their main meal, has shrunk to an hour from two or three. Food is the “vehicle for the ingestion of parental—particularly maternal—culture. But food produced by multinational corporations much less directly embodies parental values than food produced in the home” (1999: 58). The gendered division of labour—and the gendered emotional consequences of having to turn to mass-produced foods—is hardly mentioned in Slow Food publications.<sup>12</sup>

Slow Food writers critique fast food and industrially produced food as being like manufactured goods rather than proper food products. Piero Sardo, the Italian cheese expert and Slow Food writer, critiques mass-produced cheeses as “sanitized” and “odourless” made by “machines that spit them out as if they were die-cast” (2001: 5). Eric Schlosser, author of the bestseller *Fast Food Nation*, a searing critique of the health hazards of contemporary fast food, wrote an introduction to *The Pleasures of Slow Food*. He claims, “Fast food is an industrial commodity, assembled by machines out of parts shipped from various factories.” (2002: 10). Industrial food is said to be more like a “toaster oven” rather than a meal. Slow Food actively seeks out products that are tied to particular places, which feature an “artisanal” rather than “industrial” production style, and in which the social relations of production (i.e., family farms) are foregrounded. All of these are necessary conditions for Slow Food to champion a particular

product. In the early 21st century there seems to be an alliance of the elite tastemakers and consumers with artisans. Artisans were often viewed as anachronistic in terms of the classic social science divide between premodern and modern, as Terrio points out in her study of French chocolatiers artisans (2000: 14). Artisans were put in a kind of “primitive” slot that made them seem out of time, uncomfortable within modern-premodern distinctions.<sup>13</sup> Yet according to Slow Food’s formulation it is precisely this anachronistic quality—the harkening back to a premodern or preindustrial mode of production—that makes them valuable.

Sardo, another prominent Slow Food author, contrasts industrial and artisanal production in the following way: “The industrial food maker is looking to make money. The artisan wants first and foremost consumers who are knowledgeable, respectful and passionate” (2001: 6). Slow Food’s simple and in many respects, appealing, framework can be captured by the following binary oppositions:

Slow food	Fast food
Artisanal	Industrial
Handcrafted	Mass-produced
Local	Global
Natural	Artificial
Rural	Urban
Healthy	Dangerous
Pure	Tainted by additives and artificial modifications
Distinctive	Homogenized
Consumed convivially	Consumed alone
Vulnerable	Hegemonic
Appreciation	Profit
Place of origin known	Place of origin erased
Producer known	Identity of workers erased
Defetishized	Fetishized

In Slow Food’s solution to the problem of globalization, much depends on the acquisition of “taste” and knowledge about the products that enable one to consume with “pleasure.” Taste is seemingly acquired by the cultivation of connoisseurship as is evident in the elegant volume on olive oil published by the Slow Food Editore. There is a conscious attempt to evaluate olive oil in the same way as one might evaluate wine.<sup>14</sup> They give examples of the forms used to evaluate olive oil in terms of taste, colour, and smell, as well as tests to determine the acidity level. The acidity level is vital in deciding the grading of an olive oil, with the classification of “extra virgin” as the most pure, which then determines its price. Presumably, well-off consumers have the time and money to develop the capacity for this type of elite discernment. But here, and elsewhere there is not much sense of how this “taste” and “knowledge” might be passed along to the masses of

potential consumers, aside from hints of a Veblenesque trickle-down effect on consumption patterns.

In Sardo’s Slow Food publication on Italian cheeses, published by the Slow Food Editore (2001: 5) consumers are rather derisively described as “willing accomplices” with the food multinationals, by “betraying” local producers by favouring inexpensiveness over quality. But while consumers may be berated in this fashion, Slow Food’s manifesto suggests that the cultivation of knowledge about artisanal food forms a kind of barrier to preserve us from “the contagion of the multitude who mistake frenzy for efficiency” (1989). There is a silence over who can or cannot afford to have these rarified knowledges of connoisseurship, and one might imagine that a \$50 bottle of extra virgin olive oil might well be beyond the reach of many even if they did have enlightened tastes. In fact, as Leitch (2003) notes in her fascinating discussion of how the Slow Food movement emerged from the Italian Left, there is a remarkable absence of straightforward discussion of class in the Slow Food literature.

Slow Food seems similar in some ways to the Arts and Crafts movement in that they situate their solution for the harshness of capitalism in the bodies of individuals. The Arts and Crafts movement suggested that the harsh lives of the working class could be ameliorated through aesthetic means, by making their everyday objects and furnishings, beautiful and hand-crafted, so that when they returned from their hard day’s labour mass-producing goods, they could be in an aesthetically pleasing environment.<sup>15</sup> Slow Food locates the solution for the problems created by postmodern capitalism and globalization in the body as well, the bodies of consumers, in the cultivation of their tastes. But it does not address the question of the unequal distribution of resources that make pleasure in high quality food a more obtainable goal for some more than others.

## Conclusion

What is clear is that at this point in time, both producers and consumers of Tuscan extra-virgin olive oil desire to retain the identities of the producers, and the place of production *in the product* as opposed to the anonymity of industrially produced food. The olive oil producers of all classes contrasted their oil with the de-territorialized industrially produced oil. They stress the artisanal production of their olive oil: the hand picking of their olives, the crushing of them with stone millstones, and the slow, cold pressing. Italian anthropologist Christina Papa suggests that traditionally produced Umbrian olive oil retains the connection between person and good that Mauss thought particularly characterized gift economies, in that



the identity of the producer remains embedded in the oil (1998: 153). While I agree with the fact that producers want to regain or highlight their identity in their product, I think that invoking Mauss' ideas about the gift takes one in the wrong direction. In extra virgin olive oil, the distinction is not so much between gift and commodity, but between different kinds of commodities. For beloved as it is to its producers, as defetishized as it is, it is still a commodity that they sell to make a living.

Given the fact that all of the extra virgin olive oil producers I interviewed extolled the virtues of their own "slow" production over the mass-produced oil, it is perhaps surprising they were notably ambivalent about the Slow Food movement. One small producer made the point that Slow Food paradoxically serves to promote the interests of the large rather than the small producers it claims to champion. In Slow Food's publication on olive oil, it is not the small producers, like the mill owners discussed above, who get the benefit of Slow Food's publicity: it is the elite producers like the Laudemio group, and ironically, Pieralisi, a company which manufactures modern industrial machines for processing olive oil, who have full page ads in the book. Slow Food sponsors local fairs, *sagres*, but requests donations from producers of wine, oil and other products which often comprise a significant portion of the yearly yield for small producers. Large estates can afford to donate products without crippling their yearly income, but small producers can't. After initial enthusiastic support for Slow Food, small Tuscan producers had become increasingly dissatisfied with the movement.

What the Slow Food movement does indicate is that there is a widespread concern with the current trends in industrial food production and increasing dissatisfaction with a life that only orients itself toward work. Slow Food offers a resonant critique of contemporary life in a capitalist system, though one may be sceptical of the power of pleasure in food as a solution. Concern for those exploited by the capitalist system is replaced by a kind of isolation of the enlightened few who have sophisticated tastes and know how to consume "properly." Concern about the unequal relations of production is replaced by a concern with relations of consumption. The solution they offer to the depredations of modern capitalism places an enormous responsibility on consumers to change their consumption practices, eliding the differing capacities of individuals in different class positions to do so. Consumers are urged to buy products which have the identities of the producers evident in them, in contrast to industrially produced goods, which as Marx noted, rendered the labour of the worker, and the connection between the consumers and producers, invisible. It is ironic, and perhaps

a testimony to the remarkable malleability of capitalism that this un-erasure of the labour of the producer is a key element in making extra virgin olive oil a valued commodity for those who bemoan the anonymity and mystified origins of industrial food.

Meanings and symbols attached to food, as Mintz notes, are shaped in particular economic and historical contexts, regardless of claims to "timelessness" and we must assume that marketing practices are part of these contexts. In Tuscany, members of all classes expressed an affective attachment to their cold pressed extra virgin olive oil. The producers from every class showed a concern with the purity of their product in the form of harvesting, processing and bottling with authenticating markers (guarantee of origin of the oil and a date of a vintage). They contrasted their form of production to the mass produced olive oil, which may contain oils from all over Italy, or even from other countries. In this respect, extra virgin oil is in contrast to this mass produced oil, which seems a classic example of Marx's concept of the "social hieroglyphic" (1976: 163-77) of the commodity, where the labour and social lives of the producers are rendered invisible. Yet the fact that the labourers and producers are not entirely alienated from their extra virgin olive oil does not mean all producers are equally successful in marketing. Class differences are most apparent as producers attempt to market their olive oil both in Italy and abroad. Slow Food claims to champion the small producers, but ends up favouring the elite. The cachet of aristocratic heritage or sophisticated international marketing network is not available to the co-operatives to which the former *contadini* may belong. The difference lies not so much in production styles, but with capacities to reach desired consumers. Class impedes or enables access to various markets and affects which producers will be selling their extra virgin olive oil abroad, in expensive gourmet stores, to consumers who have the time and income necessary to acquire a taste for, and knowledge of authentically produced extra virgin olive oil from the much-imagined Tuscany.

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## Notes

- 1 Moore (2003: 339) uses this term to indicate the qualities of a commodity serve to index, or point to, its origin. In this case, the source identifying indexicals would be the signs that make present the moment and style of its production.
- 2 Mayes has notable company, of course, in idealizing Tuscany. A bookshop in Cortona stocked many books in English which describe foreigner's lives in Tuscany, including *A Room with a View* by Forster, *Summer's Lease* by Mortimer and a collection of women's writing called *Desiring Italy*, featuring Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot and Mary McCarthy.
- 3 An American woman who ran a thriving business renting Tuscan villas to Americans on vacation, told me that many of her clients, particularly middle-aged American women, claimed to have been inspired by Frances Mayes' book, and her house near Cortona was almost a pilgrimage site for them.
- 4 Of course, "Italian cuisine," like Indian cuisine, as Appadurai (1998) notes, is really a conglomeration of regional cuisines. The term has more to do with contemporary boundaries of the nation state than any inherent unity, a point also made by Marcella Hazan in her preface to *The Classic Italian Cookbook* (1976).
- 5 Olive oil importation to the U.S. early in the 20th century was the domain of the Mafia. It was Joe Profaci's first legitimate business; he was eventually dubbed the "Olive Oil King" (Rosenblum, 1996: 138).
- 6 From Patricia Wells' cookbook *Trattoria: Healthy, Simple, Robust Fare Inspired by the Small Family Restaurants of Italy* (1993).
- 7 This system had notable variations by region (Schneider and Schneider, 1976, Silverman, 1968, 1975).
- 8 This point was a sensitive one, since it is illegal to not have the proper paperwork, including insurance for the workers and taxes. Completing the paperwork is complicated and expensive and the olive pickers actually only work for a month a year.
- 9 This oil, which received a first-class rating in *The Olive Oil Companion* (Ridgway, 1997: 56), sold for L27 000 for 500ml from the estate and \$40.00CDN at a gourmet store in Toronto. Their promotional material included an elegant

small book printed on thick paper, with tiny pictures and descriptions of their products in Italian and English. In contrast, the mill owner's oil sold for L14 000 for one litre. Their promotional material was a single page, thrice-folded flyer, featuring cheerful pictures of *ziris* full of olive oil, but only a clumsy English translation.

- 10 Laudemio oil costs between \$45-50 at expensive gourmet stores in Toronto.
- 11 Here, Slow Food is depending on a kind of "authentic" point in the past where tradition was untouched by modern life. Some environmental groups, from whom the concept of "biodiversity" was presumably borrowed, also presuppose a pristine environment from which diversity is lost. Thanks to Stephen Bocking for fruitful discussions about biodiversity.
- 12 The following is a description of a Slow Food delicacy, *cappon magro*: "The dish consists of layers of mixed seafood, salsa verde, potato and smoked tuna. *With all the boning, shelling, cleaning and chopping, it takes three people five hours to make a real cappon magro.* It is worth every minute though..." (Honore 2002: B2, emphasis mine). Clearly, not every working household could manage this kind of domestic labour.
- 13 Their contemporary practices are measured against an ideal past and the authenticity of their craft is "judged by how well it conforms to or deviates from its preindustrial ideal type" (Terrio 2000: 14).
- 14 Roseberry notes the prominence of the wine model as one to be emulated in the marketing of yuppie coffees (1996: 768).
- 15 As it turned out, the working classes could not afford the handcrafted goods, but that was the intention. The American Arts and Crafts movement attempted to remedy this by producing high quality, well-designed, machine-produced goods, but still, the middle classes ended up being the main consumers (Turgeon and Rust, 2001).

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