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INTRODUCTION

Food Identities in Québec

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Although it may seem insignificant, and is often reduced to a mere biological and nutritional act, “eating” is a symbolic act that is embedded in the diversity of cultural behaviors (Farb and Armelagos 1985; Goody 1984). It is through distinctive modes of acquisition and production (gathering, agriculture, fishing, breeding), through the choices of specific methods, procedures and techniques of culinary and traditional processing, which can go so far as to give rise to signature products and dishes, or through consumption behaviours and particular forms of social interaction and sharing, that foods nurture as much as they represent a vision of the world and a relationship to the world, a culture (Mauss 1967; Collin-Buffier and Laurieux 2008; Turgeon and Pastinelli 2002).

In all these respects, and even more, since it is invested with the strength of the act of incorporation, which consists in making a substance alien to oneself one’s own body and adopting its qualities (Rozin 1994), eating is at the heart of the shaping, affirming and even asserting of individual and communal identities (Bruegel and Laurieux 2002). At the beginning of the 19th century, wasn’t it Brillat-Savarin, author of *La Physiologie du goût* (1825), who asserted, in an aphorism that has become an often-used formula today: “Tell me what you eat, and I’ll tell you who you are.” Since then, the work of ethnologists, anthropologists, historians and sociologists has largely focused on this dimension of foods as indicators of identity, attempting to define, through a cross-disciplinary approach, a vague and shifting notion of identity, which refers as much to singularity as to multiplicity, to tradition as to creation, to construction as to transmission. Food is therefore both a means of identification with a group – whether familial, social, territorial

or national – whose members share language, skills, beliefs, values and customs, and a matrix of relationships with otherness, with the Other who doesn't eat like us and doesn't share our culture.

It is thus in the tradition of the numerous studies carried out in recent years on food identities, but rare in the case of Québec, that we have decided to examine in this issue the question of Québec's food and culinary identity.

This question can be framed in a variety of ways and addressed from a variety of perspectives. The one that comes up most often is whether there is such a thing as a Québec food and culinary identity. And if so, how should it be addressed, defined and characterized? There are three intuitive answers to this question, but they are obviously unsatisfactory because they are based on commonly-held beliefs.

The first would be to set forth a litany of key foods or typical, trademark recipes, folkloric icons whose production process certainly deserves to be described in more patchwork fashion, like Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire* or, in a different style, Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*. Instead of wine, coffee or steak and fries, we can already imagine the chapter titles: poutine, of course, *tourtière*, bannock, sugar pie, maple syrup, the Montreal bagel, smoked-meat, cranberry, *gourgane*, Chanteclerc chicken, different types of game. The list goes on.

A second common ground might involve the braiding of a cultural mat to feature the main "influences" that have built Québec's culinary distinctiveness, a broad narrative today more or less agreed upon and centered on the four sources of traditional Québec cuisine and food: Aboriginal cultures (the use of maple, corn, smoked meats and fish and indigenous plants, pumpkin), French culture (which introduced wheat bread and farm-raised meats), British and Irish culture (which popularized tea, beer and potatoes) and, from the 19th century onwards, American culture, whose influence grew stronger in the 20th century, with the development of fast-food chains and the massive spread in Québec of Italian-American dishes and the hamburger. In this way, Québec's culinary identity could be woven together like an arrowed sash, at the crossroads of four cultures that were dominant at some point in history; an identity that is today in the process of splintering, prompted by the globalization of agri-food distribution channels and the cultural pluralism of Québec society (Tran 2024).

Finally, a third approach, perhaps more in terms of marketing than ethnology, would emphasize the central role of innovation and creativity,

which have made Québec a leader in international gastronomy. Québec's food and culinary identity, as reflected in the restaurant as a place of cultural expression, could be characterized by its daring and creative freedom, its energy and power of imagination. Chefs from Daniel Vézina to Martin Picard are reinventing "*terroir*" foods or unashamedly fusing different traditions, adapting recipes to today's tastes. Festivals, such as MTLàTABLE and Montréal en Lumière, which attract the world's culinary greats, attest to Québec's new gastronomic appeal, a situation hardly imaginable forty or fifty years ago. However, we might well ask whether these new manifestations, which began to take off in the 2010s, really express the cultural distinctiveness of Québec food and cuisine, or whether they are more an attempt to stand out among cultural destinations in an increasingly competitive tourism market (Csergo 2016).

These three ways of looking at what distinguishes Québec food and cuisine are, of course, based on tangible realities that run through the history and current situation of food practices in Québec. But they do not address the more fundamental question of the rise and historicization of a narrative that makes Québec culinary identity an entity in itself, a category loaded with meaning, or a political project.¹ The issue here is not so much the declaration of a culinary identity or a tradition, examined through its mythologies, its flagship products and its "icons," as it is the creation of the very idea of a Québec culinary identity. This idea dates from the dawn of the twentieth century, and several of the articles in this issue show that it developed in specific contexts, from the so-called Great Darkness to the Quiet Revolution, always in connection with the recognition, or even the assertion, of a Québécois culture.

Looking into food and culinary identity essentially involves looking at rhetoric and depictions, which, in the words of Roger Chartier (1986), are not simply the reflection of a reality, but the outworking of an action. The first step, therefore, is to assemble a corpus of texts produced in various eras and in various contexts – political, academic, journalistic, literary, touristic, entrepreneurial, and so on. This has never really been undertaken for Quebec, and many archive collections and regions remain unexplored. It is still necessary to question the narratives produced, to analyze their

1. The fact that the Société du réseau ÉCONOMUSÉE® has, to date, organized three symposia on "Québec culinary identity," bringing together a range of participants – researchers, practitioners and stakeholders from the cultural and agri-food sectors – bears witness to the relevance of the issue, its complexity and its open-ended nature.

impact in terms of cultural and identity affirmation, collective values and social constructs, and to uncover the ways in which they contribute to the shaping of stereotypes and mythologies.

Through these approaches, we can henceforth trace the origins and development of reference points of identity, while the diachronic analysis of the narratives and depictions they convey serves to highlight the shifting and volatile nature of these reference points.²

The text by Julia Csergo that opens this thematic issue examines, through a series of recipe inventories that seek to define and give some substance to Québec culinary identity, the conflicting tendencies that link, on the one hand, a discourse produced by academic research with the aim of safeguarding traditions that are crumbling in the face of Québec's modernization and urbanization, and, on the other, a food-centred and promotional discourse that develops in contexts of rising Québec nationalism, which values the vitality of these same culinary traditions updated to suit current tastes. The difficulties encountered in setting up an exhaustive survey of Québec culinary traditions in academic circles, and the takeover of this field by hotel training, gastronomy and tourism interests, also bear witness to a more global transformation of the representations of what is meant or implied by "Québec cultural identity," from an archiving of remnants to a typology of regional specificities, to the more current notion of living traditions.

As shown in the study by Ariane Simard-Picard of identity-based representations of French-Canadian cuisine in Québec in the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec's corpus of digitized periodicals from the 1930s to the 1950s, this framework of perceptions (Williams 1973), crystallized around an understanding of modernization, Americanization and the transmission of tradition, can also be traced in the content produced for the press. Simard-Picard's analysis shows, however, that curiously enough, the social images linked to cooking and its transformations are far from coinciding with a distinction that exists between the editorial lines of liberal and nationalist periodicals. In addition, research according

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2. As the anthropologist Handler (1987) pointed out in relation to his fieldwork on Québec nationalism, the search for a holistic cultural specificity that would characterize Québec identity continually came up against a bureaucratic impossibility within the new Ministry of Cultural Affairs, faced with the task of establishing parameters that would adequately account for the complexity of the object.

to key words for the period studied highlights the importance of tourism for the public promotion of culinary distinctives, as well as the emergence of new identity referents that will rapidly take hold in a fast-changing Québec culture.

Gwenaëlle Reyt's essay explores the emergence of those ideas associated with a cuisine that identifies itself as Québécoise, in the specific context of the city of Montreal's desire to establish itself as an international tourist destination, which culminated in the unforgettable 1967 World's Fair. The study makes use of another medium, tourist and food-focused guides, whose purpose is, in a way, to "arrange" reality, to make it visible, to render a place intelligible, and, incidentally, in the case of restaurants, to create categories and classifications for the reader's comprehension. Despite this, Reyt notes a great deal of confusion, particularly in the use of the categories "Canadian" and "French-Canadian," reflecting the changes in identity undergone in the 1960s and 1970s not only by Québec as a province, but particularly by the city of Montreal.

Far from the noise and fury of the Québec city metropolis, Roseline Bouchard's essay takes us to the heart of the food practices in a religious community practising asceticism, the *Antoniennes de Marie* in Chicoutimi. It offers a fresh perspective on the development of identities through the study of dietary practices, based on a survey of this religious community of cooks. It shows how the vows of poverty and chastity shape the practices of penance and dietary mortification, as well as table manners. However, while the rules and normative frameworks dictated by the necessity of asceticism give structure to both the content of meals and the social practices of communal eating, as well as to table manners and rituals in the dining hall, Bouchard shows through archival research and fieldwork that these restrictions are gradually being relaxed in the wake of Vatican II. Those same years, the start of the 1970s, saw a reduction in ascetic practices, and a secularization of dietary mores, despite an ever-present vow of poverty and chastity.

While these first four essays map out different places and draw different lines of development where a culinary identity is taking shape in Québec, the four following articles focus on a singular culinary object or a specific food practice that plays a part in the creation and dissemination of identity-related representations.

The question of the narrative and its mediation devices, already addressed in the articles by Csergo, Reyt and Simard-Picard, is also at the forefront of Geneviève Sicotte's work on poutine, a culinary element if ever there was one, and at the very heart of identity-related narratives and representations. Sicotte shows that, in the proliferation of stories surrounding poutine, the question is not one of authenticity, as little controversy remains on the subject, but of resonance. Poutine is thus a "projection screen for a new fantasy" whose representations are embodied in a variety of popular cultural artifacts that nonetheless feature an archetypal figure, an avatar of a modern Québec mythology: the entrepreneur, the inventor, the trickster. As we probe the origin stories of poutine, we discover an alternative reading of the historical journey of Quebeckers, that of a nation that is both inventive and mischievous, deep-frying every potato under the weight of an intimidating history and an inhospitable territory.

Following this analytical discourse on the myths and representations surrounding a dish that symbolizes Québec culinary identity, Patrick Charbonneau's text plunges us rather more deeply into the technical and material dimensions of another dish whose Québec roots are much more disputed: *sucre à la crème*. Combining an analysis of the specific nature of the crystallization process with an examination of historical sources bearing witness to the methods used to prepare maple sugar, and comparing the chronology of techniques related to other comparable confections, the text suggests a link between the preparation of maple sugar and the recipe for *sucre à la crème* as it became popularized in Québec at the turn of the 20th century, and thus reconsiders its social and territorial roots in Québec.

The last two articles in this issue address the presence of nature and the importance of local presence in the ever-renewed melting pot of ideas that shape the perceptions of identity associated with Québec foods (Csergo and Etcheverria 2020). The text by Alain Girard and Laurence Palin thus highlights, as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, the renewed interest in developing alternative economic practices geared towards the consolidation of short-distance distribution, the development of local purchasing, and the promotion of food autonomy. It's in this context that new Québec regional products, such as forest mushrooms, literally rooted in the land, are helping to rediscover a product that is already part of an ecosystem of regional players involved in its harvesting, processing, promotion and marketing in different Québec regions. While the mycotourism sector is still developing, the construction of a culinary identity and the creation of a food culture around the forest mushroom have yet to be established.

The last article, by Van Troi Tran, also addresses the territorial ancestry of a fungus, but of a different type: that of the yeasts used to make so-called natural or wild beers in Québec. Since the 1990s, Québec microbreweries have played an important role in transmitting images and symbols linked to Québec's folklore and territory (Bélanger 2021). In recent years, however, this territorial grounding has taken on a more material aspect in the use of local ingredients. This article looks at the images associated with the use of wild yeasts to impart a distinctive taste tone and thus reinforce the so-called local flavour of a production that is geared more towards quality and distinctiveness than quantity. But here again, we're talking about a food culture in the making, which is nevertheless presented by certain players as the future of Québec's brewing identity.³

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3. This relationship, literally alive in the soil and air, extends and in some ways distinguishes itself from the relationship between local products and territorial identification already examined by Laurier Turgeon in the Québec context, since it is no longer a question of "reproducing food identically" (Turgeon 2010: 484) according to some ancestral know-how and recorded in a set of specifications, but of crafting a unique, sometimes irreplaceable product by working in conjunction with the unpredictability of living beings.

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