

Food Heritage

Subjects: [Food Science & Technology](#) | [Anthropology](#) | [Geography](#)

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The entry explores the concept of food heritage, focusing mainly on the anthropological, geographical, and sociological debate. Although the review identifies some conceptualisations that frame heritage in the food and gastronomic domains, it also shows the high degree of fragmentation of the debate. In so doing, it sheds light on how the concept of food heritage from a theoretical point of view is still in progress.

food heritage

food

cultural heritage

1. Introduction

In the recent decades, food heritage been at the centre of a growing attention in the academic and institutional fields. This attention is linked to the emergence of several initiatives aimed at safeguarding and promoting tangible and intangible elements of the foodscape. In 2010, the inclusion of the Mediterranean diet, Mexican cuisine, and the gastronomic meal of the French in UNESCO's "Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity" list recognised the need to protect food and culinary cultures given their importance as identity markers, as well as their role in fostering the economic, political, and social empowerment of local communities^{[1][2]}. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of social scientists, especially in the field of food studies. Geyzen^[3] called this phenomenon "heritage turn", that is, the rise of a strand of research exploring the link between identity crises and the development of heritage-based projects linked to food and the gastronomic milieu. This has also been at the core of the debate in food and social sciences, especially with regard to the link between the promotion of local agri-food resources, rural development, and food tourism.

2. Concurring Conceptualizations of Food Heritage

In the current debate, food heritage can be conceived as an umbrella concept that includes different definitions such as what can be defined as agri-food heritage, culinary heritage, and gastronomic heritage. Indeed, scholars do not agree on a univocal definition of the term^[4].

Some authors follow a conceptualisation in line with the one proposed by B essiere^[5] (p.27) that includes: "agricultural products, ingredients, dishes and cooking artefacts. It also comprises the symbolic dimension of food (table manners, rituals), techniques, recipes, eating practices and food-related behaviours and beliefs". In other studies, agri-food heritage, culinary heritage, and gastronomic heritage are used interchangeably with food heritage and heritage food (i.e., the physical elements of food heritage such as local products and traditional

equipment). However, as shown below, there are some differences in their specific meanings and conceptualisation.

Agri-food heritage includes elements belonging to the upstream part of the foodscape. It focuses mainly on the relationships between agricultural products, production practices, and traditional knowledge linked to rural contexts. This link is often expressed by the category *terroir*. Agricultural products (primary or processed) characterised by a strong rootedness in rural, often marginal areas represent the material element at the core of this concept.

The term culinary heritage mainly considers elements and practices related to the preparation and consumption of food. Timothy and Ron^[6] (p. 99) include in this definition “a mix of tangible (e.g., ingredients and cooking accoutrements) and intangible (e.g., tastes, smells, recipes and eating traditions) elements that contribute to the cultural values and characteristics of places”. A strong emphasis is given to socio-cultural elements attached to the culinary sphere, its ethnic or national dimension, and its role as an identity marker. Some definitions also denote the centrality of the continuity and evolution of practices and knowledge, as well as their intergenerational transmission.

An analogy with the definition of intangible cultural heritage proposed by Unesco is evident in the focus on a corpus of culinary elements (more rarely individual dishes or recipes), a strong emphasis on practices, regional or national boundaries of heritage, and its marked political connotation. In this sense, Unesco^[7] includes in the definition of intangible cultural heritage: “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity”.

The concept of gastronomic heritage takes on a similar meaning, especially with regard to the role of elements such as sociability, legacy, identity, tradition, and sense of belonging. However, it has a more comprehensive dimension that can include products, practices, and knowledge related to the cultivation, harvesting, and conservation of agricultural products.

3. Conclusions and Future Directions

The analysis highlights the absence of a shared definition of intangible heritage regarding food and gastronomy. Although the review identifies some conceptualisations that frame heritage in the food and gastronomic domains, it also shows the high degree of fragmentation of the debate. In so doing, it shows how the concept of food heritage from a theoretical point of view is still in progress.

Despite the differences and variability, it is possible to identify some common elements that the different conceptualisations of food heritage share. First, they pay attention to physical objects embedded into well-defined

geographical areas and cultural milieu. They are products or dishes linked to the public sphere and very often exchanged in market networks. Another commonality entails the formal connotation of heritage. In other words, material and immaterial elements of the foodscape become heritage elements following a process of official attribution of this status. There is, therefore, a prevailing focus on the process (i.e., heritagisation) and its dynamics rather than on the physical object (i.e., products and dishes).

A thorough understanding of food heritage would benefit from a change and expansion of perspective from what makes up food heritage to the dynamics and motivations behind the recognition of food heritage.

By assuming that heritage is a socially constructed concept, the research invites further studies to explore the manner in which objects and practices acquire this status, as well as what economic, political, and social factors drive this phenomenon. Future investigations could address this topic by exploring how food heritage generates and evolves in different places and times.

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