

Against the (Heritage, Heirloom) Grain: Foodways as Cultural Brand

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In speaking, as my title announces, against the heirloom, heritage grain, I want to argue that two properties of such grains are not incidental, but constitutive. First, as a matter of statistical probability, heirloom grains are most often not (as the name would imply) *inherited*, but rather *purchased*. As consumers, we farm out the inheriting to someone else, with whom we then exchange money for the grain in question. Second, insofar as that grain is a heritage grain, it, like everything else associated with heritage, involves a selective subset of history. Heritage is an *edited* form of history, and it's edited in the service of negotiating and maintaining identitarian boundaries. Those boundaries, in turn, transform heritage into a form of *property*—something that can be mine or ours or theirs, and that, consequently, I can defend, betray, or alter (if it's mine) or (if it's theirs), beg, borrow, or steal. Foodways are not simply food, but food embedded in a range of cultural projects and assigned cultural meanings—meanings that I argue are affected when its bearers assume commodity form.

In approaching, then, the heirloom grain as, first, a commodity, and second, one implicated in a process of historical editing, I understand my project to work against the *discursive* grain of this conference, which, in its call for papers, inquires as to how “*old* foodways, . . . have transformed us all.” But the call for papers also inquires of the “the *recovery* of heirloom crops,” which suggests a gap-ridden chronology in which the heirloom must be *recovered*, and, since it must, transformed by us rather than the other way around. Let me begin, then, a *skeptical*, but I hope not *cynical* tour of southern foodways, especially those of the South

Carolina lowcountry, as they are embedded in practices and discourses that have, in the space of a generation, facilitated the ascendance of food as a culture-bearing medium.

Let me first emphasize that conceiving of culture and consumption as *opposed* is erroneous, despite that it is conventional to do so. Few persons identify themselves primarily—or even importantly—as consumers, while *consumerism* stands alongside other scandalous isms (sexism, racism) that, although understood to afflict society as a whole, do so almost exclusively by afflicting *other people*. Culture, on the other hand, is implicitly valued. My daughters have t-shirts that ask on the front, “Got Culture?” and the answer is supposed to be yes. Culture, moreover, is often imagined as a thing that *can't* be bought or sold, an idea that has a long genealogy ranging back through the Frankfurt School to nineteenth-century Romanticism. As Pierre Bourdieu observes, one of Romanticism’s crucial “inventions” was “the representation of culture as a kind of superior reality, irreducible to the vulgar demands of economics”—although, as he adds, this representation was itself a “reactio[n] against the pressures of an anonymous market.”¹ But even when culture is conceived as something unavailable for purchase, and market forces as a faceless matrix of supply and demand, consumption offers a fairly reliable index of desire, including desires that derive from and reproduce social imaginaries. As Grant McCracken observes, consumption can—and does—render “blueprint of culture” substantial, and thus “plays a vital part in the cultural constitution of the world.”² To some significant degree, consumption both *reproduces* and *shapes* conceptions of place, history, and identity.

Ironically, however, the romantic conception of culture as resistant to market homogenization has itself proven highly marketable. Nowhere has this proven more true than in Charleston, South Carolina. As Stephanie Yuhl shows in *A Golden Haze of Memory* (2005), elite Charlestonians of the 1930s literally sold tradition by inventing “‘Historic Charleston,’ a

burgeoning tourist industry” that enshrined the city “as a place where remnants of a glorious past lived on, unmarred by the uglier sides of modernity.”³ Yuhl’s study exemplifies a number of trends that have emerged in recent southern studies, notably in considering the production and consumption of cultural goods not merely as the industrialization of an authentic prior culture, but as a significant field of cultural activity in its own right. To make and market Charleston as an elite group did is to engineer a product with social effects, among them a selective *idea* of history materialized in objects and deployed within a social order.

Such editing is prominent in the discourses and products of contemporary foodways. According to the program for a 2007 Southern Foodways Alliance field-trip to Charleston, For over three hundred years, Charleston’s fortunes have been intertwined with her natural bounty. Rice fueled the economic engine and appeared on the tables of rich, poor and enslaved. Fortunes made off the land and the sea built this port city. Prosperity has waxed and waned but the wealth of local ingredients . . . endured. Planters have given way to artisanal farmers whose passion for excellence enrich rather than enslave. The abundance from the land and sea continue to delight and inspire professional chefs, home cooks, locals and visitors alike.⁴

Gesturing lightly toward slavery, if only to note its displacement by “artisanal farmers,” this account links Charleston’s fortunes to “her natural [sic] bounty.” “Fortunes” derive not from labor extraction, but emerge naturally “off the land and the sea.” “Rice,” not the rice plantation, fueled its economic engine and “appears” (there it is, somehow) on all tables, even the ones the (historical) slaves probably lacked. The constant in Charleston’s history is the “wealth of local ingredients.” But in order to maximize the delight and inspiration here noted, local ingredients are often marketed in such a way as to distance them from unsavory histories. Anson Mills, one

of the South's leading producers of "organic heirloom grains," describes its mission as the perpetuation of Carolina Rice Kitchen cuisine, which, according to Anson Mills website,

arose when three distinct rice cultures came together . . . : Venetian rice farmers who designed the canals, Africans who brought their rice management methods to the endeavor, and Native Americans who worked in the fields. The association of these peoples and their cultures resulted in a vibrant melting-pot exchange that ultimately became a new cuisine.⁵

Portraying Africans as rice management consultants who "brought" their expertise to a "vibrant melting-pot exchange" is, at the least, a *selective* trans-Atlantic history. Describing this cuisine as a "complex expression of community that emerges in a specific locale" is one way of putting it. Another way of putting it is that the cuisine is a "complex effect of commercial monoculture and slave labor in a distinct locale." The selective remembrance isn't accidental, because if you're paying heirloom grain prices, you'd rather associate the product with a vibrant melting-pot exchange than with the world of, say, *12 Years a Slave*. As Anson Mills is well aware, jettisoning *that* history means enhancing the heirloom effect.

My broad point here is that the heritage product brings to bear a profit motive on cultural memory. As a general rule, a "Heritage, Not Hate" bumper sticker will sell better than one including the Hate. And because heritage, or an idea of a cultural past, is part of the value added—at least insofar as a heritage grain is valued more than a plain old grain—it will be valued in certain ways and not in others. The line between a poetics of culture and a poetics of advertising is anything but clear.

Multiplied by thousands of products and across millions of exchanges, the symbolic work performed in such transactions is not insignificant. One of the recurring themes of such

transactions, as we have seen, is the screening of labor, a function Marx attributed to the commodity fetish generally. For Marx, the magical belief in the commodity as “an object with intrinsic value” required the erasure of labor such that the thing itself, not the history of production behind it, was perceived to mediate social relationships. No foodie, Marx famously asserted that “From the taste of wheat it is not possible to tell who produced it.” By contrast, purveyors of heritage grains tell you a *lot* about who produced it in order to establish the product’s continuity with pre-modern or traditional forms of labor. If you order online from the Old Mill in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee (home of Dollywood), you’ll learn that they grind their heritage grains “the same way the pioneers did.” Indeed, “Resident millers . . . hand-fill, weigh and tie each bag of stone ground grain.” Hand-filling and tying bags of grain all day may not be a great job, and it’s probably not a superior method of filling and tying bags of grain, but it transfers to the grain the idea that it was made “the same way the pioneers did.” That imagined lineage, in turns, facilitates a broader conception of southern tradition, since, as the Old Mill explains, “If there's a warm bowl of homemade white grits on your breakfast table, you know you're experiencing traditional Southern fare and hospitality at its best.”⁶ In order for the heritage product to deliver culture to the table, it must penetrate what Marx (and for that matter, southern agrarians from Andrew Lytle to Wendell Berry) says that it cannot: the veil of the faceless, anonymous market. And it must do this by bridging time and space, bringing heritage into the present and delivering some original scene of production into a domain of consumption whose alterity is suppressed. The field and mill must be rendered available via the website; home cooking must survive its dislocation to the restaurant.

One effect of these transfers is the potential for cultural theft. Writing of lowcountry shrimp and grits in *Gourmet* magazine, John Edge laments that, “Thanks to a legion of trend-

happy restaurateurs, the dish's origins as a fisherman's breakfast are now obfuscated, its subtleties consigned to memory." Edge grants Bill Neal, who revived the dish at Chapel Hill's Crooks Corner, the license to use garlic (a non-native ingredient), since Neal "was a native of South Carolina." But he sharply criticizes the culinary depredations of non-natives: a Canadian chef, for example, who promiscuously adds Swiss cheese and "a dry rub better suited to Boston butt." Outsiders "bent upon taking liberties with shrimp and grits" are enjoined to "take a moment to consider from whence the dish came," a form of contemplation that, presumably, will make adding pesto—"heaven forbid, pesto"—a thing too painful to contemplate.⁷

For consumers like Edge who wish to protect provincial foodways from foreign assault, the purest incarnation of the dish would likely be found at Sean Brock's Husk, which promotes an "ingredient-driven cuisine that begins in the rediscovery of heirloom products." Husk offers a seasonal shrimp and grits that uses Anson Mills grits among its other (rediscovered) heirloom products.⁸ But even here, the boundary between *ours* and *theirs* has proven fractious. As reported in an Austin blog, black culinary historian Michael Twitty recently gave a talk criticizing a *Food and Wine* magazine article about (and I'm quoting here from the Austin blog) "Brock, who is Caucasian, going on a trip to West Africa to learn about the real roots of 'his cuisine,' a phrase Twitty let hang over the audience." According to Twitty, "it takes a white chef with 'everything but the burden' (and the financial resources to get to Africa in the first place) to draw that kind of national media attention."⁹ Twitty's complaint of the possibilities of "cultural piracy" is nothing new. In his 1940 poem "Note on Commercial Theatre," Langston Hughes sounds a similar note regarding how Broadway appropriates the blues—"You've taken my blues and gone"—and strips them of their soul: "you fixed 'em / so they don't sound like me." For Brock, in the meantime, travel to Senegal enables the *replenishment* of soul. In the *Food and*

Wine article referenced above, he explains that “as we modernized these dishes, they lost their soul. We owe it to both Southerners and Western Africans to find it back again.”¹⁰ Since some of us this evening will be eating Senegalese Gumbo, we will have the opportunity to consider firsthand whether we are fulfilling a cultural debt or engaging in cultural piracy, both of which assume the loading of identitarian and otherwise immaterial properties (“soul”) onto things.

Since Carolina Gold Rice is also included in the dish, we will also have the opportunity consider another of Michael Twitty’s criticisms. Noting the revived interest in the grain, Twitty observes that it has “become so chic (and expensive) that ‘it’s no longer affordable for the people who cultivate it and whose cultures depend on it.’”¹¹ Without reiterating what has become a fairly common critique of the so-called “Slow Food Elite,” let me make the obvious point that not only is heritage not *free*, it often isn’t *cheap* either (as your conference receipt will attest). This creates the potential for the grain to deliver not only heritage, but the kind of *distinction* Pierre Bourdieu identifies as available through acts of consumption that generate social markers of taste and group differentiation. If you prefer Carolina Gold to Uncle Ben’s, you’re also likely to prefer craft beer to Budweiser, and to identify yourself as different from the kind of person who eats at the Olive Garden.

In closing, I want to shift gears a bit to consider what I regard as the positive potential of the heritage grain in the South. Although the commodity form of such products often exerts a distorting effect on history—transforming it into a more palatable heritage—the same editing process potentially enables the kind of cultural work identified by Tara McPherson, who writes that “it is precisely from within the domain of representation that the difficulties and possibilities of a politics of alliance [might] begin to emerge.”¹² Certainly this kind of alliance was actively sought by the Southern Foodways Alliance, which John Egerton described in 1979 as an effort

driven by a “spirit of inclusiveness.” “The time has come,” Egerton wrote, “for all of us— . . . growers and processors, scholars and foodlorists, . . . women and men, blacks and whites and other identity groups, one and all—to sit down and break bread together around one great Southern table.”¹³ As a historical matter, the one great Southern table never existed: indeed, it is difficult to image a field of cultural or economic activity in which historical divisions of gender, class, and especially race are more prominent than the production and consumption of food. But in imagining that the one Southern table *does* exist, or that it *might*, Egerton generates an idea of the South—a representation or image of it—that potentially, and hopefully, mediates a social relationship between people. The keywords of southern foodways discourse—syncretism, sharing, collaboration, collective effort—imagine a past that may not be historical, but may prove useful nonetheless.

By another logic, one might argue that the heritage foodway has displaced less desirable objects of cultural investment. In 1929, Ulrich Bonnell Phillips identified white supremacy as the cardinal test of a Southerner and the central theme of Southern history; in 2008, William Ferris claimed that “*The Moon Pie* anchors the memories of Southerners in their history and culture.”¹⁴ If Ferris is right, that’s progress, and I say that only half-jokingly. To the extent that the MoonPie, or the local barbeque, or the heritage grain serve as cultural anchors, I am glad that they do, given the nature of many past (and weightier) anchors.

But whatever value or lack thereof we assign to the heritage product, it is crucial to recognize the role of the commodity form through which heritage is accessed. As McCracken observes, consumer goods offer bridges to displaced meanings, and thus constitute “instruments for the reproduction, representation, and manipulation” of cultures.¹⁵ A poetics of consumption requires, then, acute awareness of the displacements and manipulations involved—an awareness

that representation involves neither a simulation severed from cultural “reality,” nor a re-presentation that *delivers* the culture, but rather, as in any symbolic act, a dynamic interaction between sign and referent. This recognition is important because, as a culture-bearing medium, the commodity has gained market share, and because the culture bought is related to the culture bought into.

NOTES

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 114.

² Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 74.

³ Stephanie E. Yuhl, *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 6.

⁴ “Charleston: Citadel of the Lowcountry.”

⁵ Anson Mills, “Antebellum Coarse White Grits,” <http://ansonmills.com/products/8> (11 March 2013); Anson Mills, “What We Do,” http://ansonmills.com/what_we_do_pages (11 March 2013).

⁶ The Old Mill, “About Us,” <http://www.old-mill.com/aboutus> (13 March 2013); The Old Mill, “Grits—White Corn,” <http://www.old-mill.com/product/665/20> (13 March 2013).

⁷ John T. Edge, “Kiss My Grits,” <http://www.gourmet.com/magazine/2000s/2000/10/grits> (11 November 2012).

⁸ Husk Restaurant, “About Husk,” <http://www.huskrestaurant.com/about/> (15 November 2012).

⁹ Addie Broyles, “Food for Black Thought: Michael Twitty on Culinary Justice and Why Food Heritage Matters,” <http://www.austin360.com/weblogs/relish-austin/2013/oct/08/food-black-thought-michael-twitty-culinary-justice/>.

¹⁰ Jody Eddy, “The Senegalese Roots of Southern Cooking,” <http://www.foodandwine.com/articles/the-senegalese-roots-of-southern-cooking>.

¹¹ Broyles, “Food for Black Thought.”

¹² McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie*, 30.

¹³ Egerton, “Founders Letter.”

¹⁴ William Ferris, “The Moon Pie: A Southern Journey,” in *Cornbread Nation 4: The Best of Southern Food Writing*, ed. Dale Volberg Reed and John Shelton Reed (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008): 153-59.

¹⁵ McCracken, *Culture and Consumption*, xi.