The Allium’s Bite: Cultural Representations of Garlic in France and Spain

by

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1. Introduction

In their cookbook *Jerusalem*, Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi recount their distinct experiences of childhood in the same city: as natives of different areas of Jerusalem, the culture, traditions, and food they grew up surrounded by were entirely individual. They attribute this diversity to Jerusalem’s historical importance as “a meeting point between Europe, Asia, and Africa” (18) and the consequent sieges and occupations that make up its rich and varied history. The city’s subjection to countless empires has imbued Jerusalem with a particular spirit of “faith, learning, devotion, and…fanaticism” (Ottolenghi and Tamimi 18) that persists today thanks to Jerusalem’s still contested status. The manner in which the city grew in the modern era is also unique to the place: rapid population growth throughout the twentieth century was characterized by the immigration and settling of entire communities that maintained their traditions and customs, creating insularity among pockets of the city that bespeaks the distance between each author’s experience of childhood.

Jerusalem’s culinary identity is also shaped by its typical Jewish and Arab family structures that provide for many with little means. In *Jerusalem*, the authors question the concept of a local cuisine, wondering if the cultural particularities that exist side by side to make up the city’s “intricate, convoluted mosaic of peoples” (Ottolenghi and Tamimi 10) truly remain distinct from one another. Ultimately, Ottolenghi and Tamimi decide that a class of uniquely Jerusalem food does exist; in spite of the many and varied religions, roots, and customs that form the city’s fabric, there exist elements of thought (as it relates to consumption), ingredients, and taste that coalesce to form an identifiable local culture.
In much the same manner, the neighboring countries of France and Spain have experienced shifting relationships with one another throughout history that inform and reflect their politics, consumption patterns, and taste. Both powerful colonial hegemons of the early modern era, the signing of the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659 ended a decades-long bout of political interference and shifting boundary possession between the countries which led to a relative stability that persists today. Unlike the city of Jerusalem, however, France and Spain, and the regions that compose them, have long been associated with particular ingredients, techniques, and taste profiles. For example, Spanish cuisine is largely oil-based, while the French more often use butter to flavor their dishes. According to a 2012 study, Spaniards consume more vegetables and fish than do the French, who eat more meat and eggs (Van Dooren and Kramer). Alcohol, particularly wine, is enjoyed in both cultures.

Fig. 1. Garlic production per hectare by region in France ("La production de plants certifiés d’ail en France;" Le plant certifié d’ail; Prosemail/GNIS; n.d.; Web; 19 Mar. 2015); Fig. 2. Garlic production per ton by region in Spain ("Origen, importancia económica y distribución geográfica;" Material vegetal (ajo); Ministerio de Agricultura, Alimentación y Medio Ambiente; n.d.; Web; 19 Mar. 2015).
Garlic is thought of as an essential aromatic element in many styles of cooking including those found in Spain and France. It is an ingredient that has the power to enhance the flavor of a dish without sacrificing its specificity or rendering it unidentifiable as belonging to a certain cuisine. Today, many varieties of garlic, each with their own properties, have Protected Geographical Status in regions of France and Spain, though the manner and output of production in each country differs, as shown in the maps above (see figs. 1 and 2). The history of garlic in Europe dates to the Roman era. As the Roman Empire gained power and influence, many Greek traditions and philosophies were integrated into Roman culture, including the use of garlic as a medicinal tool. During the Middle Ages, the transmission of knowledge about plant-based cures mostly occurred through monks in Medieval monasteries, signaling an association with religion and paganism. After its transition from an item with strictly curative properties to something consumable, garlic remained mostly used and eaten by the working classes in Europe until its adoption by wealthier people during the Renaissance period. According to scholar Richard Rivlin, “It is said that King Henry IV of France in the late 16th and early 17th centuries was baptized in water containing garlic to protect him from evil spirits and probably from disease” (953S).

At this time, the relationship between France and Spain was still marked by competition. Artistic renderings suggest the often-contentious interaction between the two imperial powers during this period. A seventeenth-century engraving depicts a well-dressed Frenchman seated at the edge of a body of water, his fishing line strung with garlic cloves that have attracted a Spaniard who munches on them eagerly, the
rest of his body still submerged (see fig. 3). The caption, part of which reads, “…lors qu’on tâche de le prendre, tout ce qu’il touche il lenglutit [sic],” and what appears to be a boat abandoned by the Spaniard in the background suggest a French view of their Spanish neighbors as imprudent and gluttonous in nature.¹

Fig. 3. Artist unknown; Pièce facétieuse [estampe]: Un homme assis au bord de l’eau tient suspendues à sa ligne plusieurs gousses d’ail que mord un Espagnol dont on ne voit que le haut du corps; 1638; Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris; Gallica; Web; 20 Mar. 2015.

The travel diaries of French aristocrats through Spain in the same era imply a similar perception. French descriptions of Spanish dishes as pungent and overly seasoned

¹ Another engraving from the same time period depicts a Spaniard with little else to distinguish him but a head of garlic in his left hand, suggesting that the association between garlic and Spanish barbarism was popular in French imagery.
thanks to their liberal incorporation of garlic and other spices come across as critical
and unappealing to the authors, and a quote by one traveler hints at the different usage
of garlic as a raw ingredient in each country’s style of cooking; in describing the
moderation that characterizes the Spanish diet, Jouvin writes, “Se conforman con
algunas legumbres para su comida, y creen hacer un gran festín cuando comen
algunas zanahorias, algunas lechugas, nabos, ajos y otras legumbres” (qtd. in Diez
Borque 77). These early depictions of garlic in French and Spanish contexts suggest
that the French take an unfavorable view of Spanish cuisine and culture, illuminating
the distinctions that marked their relationship and in many cases continue to
classify the two countries today.

In cookbooks of all regions, garlic tends to appear not as a main ingredient but
as a crucial component to integrate into other dishes. Despite its importance in many
recipes, it is rare to see garlic as a heading for means of textual organization in the
way that heartier foods like meat and vegetables are. It seems that garlic warrants
little introduction in modern recipe books. Still, despite its universality, the approach
to garlic differs between cultures, and certainly between regions of the same nation.
The Larousse Gastronomique contains an entry for “aillade” that reads, “Definition
used in the south of France, which applies, according to the district, Languedoc or
Provence, to preparations which, although they differ somewhat, are all made of
garlic” (Montagné, Turgeon, and Froud 21) – for instance, an uncooked vinaigrette, a
preparation on bread, and regional variations on aïoli, the recipes for which follow
the definition. There are yet more basic preparations of garlic listed under the
Larousse Gastronomique’s “garlic” heading, and these, too, are distinct from its use
as an element to be incorporated into other, more complex dishes. Garlic’s representation in recipe books reveals that it is no less of an essential ingredient for the lack of a spotlight given it by authors; in fact, perhaps the very way it pervades recipes of such diverse origins and taste profiles speaks to its key role in many styles and types of cooking.

In his article “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India,” Arjun Appadurai examines the modern Indian cookbook as a model of a cultural conception linked to individual preferences and widespread consumption patterns. Cookbooks, he contends, and particularly those published in and about India in the recent trend, underscore issues of “language and literacy, cities and ethnicity, [and] women and domesticity” (4). They are by their nature limited to a literate audience, shaped by patterns of regional consumerism, and indicative of a certain type of user, all elements that are particularly relevant in a culture characterized by class disparities lingering from a colonialized past. In fact, Appadurai suggests that India’s political history as a colonized nation contributes to its absence of textual representations of food, a fact made particularly curious when one considers the importance of food as “a central trope in classical and contemporary Hindu thought” (10). Perhaps, as the author suggests, “the convergence of the moral, social, medical, and soteriological implications of food consumption is nowhere greater than in traditional Hindu India” thanks to the stronger connection between food and its “moral and medical modes” (Appadurai 11) than its purely gustatory aspects, a connection heightened by the colonial legacy that persists in the form of stark and meaningful class divisions.
Apart from why cooking (and not just food) is only recently being discussed in India on a nationwide scale is the question of how it is written about. Appadurai believes that food’s representation in Indian cookbooks reflects specific cultural preferences, and urges the reader to consider the editing process involved in the gathering of recipes for a cookbook. To this end, he addresses the multiple ways in which to tie together regional dishes to form a sort of illusion of an all-encompassing national cuisine – a unified concept that doesn’t really exist in a country as large and diverse as India. As cookbooks reveal the societal and cultural aspects and trends of the places they represent, garlic in cookbooks, too, in a cross-cultural study of Spain and France, can be examined to determine “whether the long-term historical and cultural idiosyncrasies” involved in its use “make the culinary dynamics of contemporary societies different, in spite of certain broad processual similarities” (Appadurai 22). In much the same way that Appadurai’s study of the greater category of cookbooks reveals what they say about the societies that produce and read them, reading French and Spanish cookbooks for how they integrate garlic can shed light on the role of the comestible product in these particular societies.

A view of garlic as a consumable item necessitates a look back at its production in the countries in question. Unavoidably linked to the topic of the agricultural production of garlic in France and Spain are the questions of labor laws and organization and technology and industrialization. What’s more, these social spheres tied to the production of garlic encompass in many ways and for many people a national self-concept. Susan Rogers argues that in France more than in other nations, there exist “specifically French ways of thinking about the relevance of
agriculture to the social good” (51). Because of its historical importance in the building of the French nation – by the end of the Second World War agriculture accounted for nearly one-third of the nation’s labor force, and after the war, “it was redefined as a critical motor for the modernization of the French economy” (Rogers 54) and thereby society – it is thought of even today as meriting associations beyond the merely economic or trade-related. The Spanish economy’s reliance on agriculture throughout history is similar; an anecdote in Les Blank’s documentary film *Garlic is as Good as Ten Mothers* describes how destitute Spanish laborers in the post-Civil War era subsisted on combinations of bread, tomatoes, and garlic when there was nothing else to eat. In this way, garlic can be viewed not just as an ingredient but as a transnational plant with social and economic implications.

In *Crafting the Culture and History of French Chocolate*, Susan Terrio addresses the effects of the production of a single ingredient on broader society. What differentiates her article from this study of garlic is the artisanal element of chocolate making, a process characterized by a tradition of craftspeople trained in a specific subset of food production. Unlike Terrio’s chocolate, garlic is a natural product whose human involvement stops at its harvest and distribution. Among other questions, the author ponders how political transitions like the European Community reforms of the late 1980s affect food production and consumption; how a craft like chocolate making is “contested, represented, and reproduced through the practices and discourses of the people making it” (Terrio 8); and how the social and cultural makeup of a certain region is reflected in its people’s taste preferences and in how quickly they change. She regards the contextualization of a certain cultural subset like
chocolatiers as essential to situating “both the craft and its artisans within history,” thus “enhanc[ing] our understanding of how minority groups in European centers make and assert their own particular histories” (Terrio 20). The concept of a collective identity is important to Terrio, who developed close relationships with artisan chocolate makers whose craft has over time been challenged by industrialization and the consequent devaluation of manual processes and a transforming sense of taste among a public that has embraced the fast food and “hyperm[arkets]” of the modern era. She also suggests that chocolate is a part of France’s “gastronomic patrimony” (Terrio 3), perhaps second only to bread, which throughout history has been “the basic metaphor for eating itself” (Terrio 23). Although the questions of artisanship addressed by Terrio do not apply to the production and distribution of garlic, her understanding of evolving consumption patterns, modernization, and the ideologies that surround both are important in determining how garlic reflects and is affected by similar structures as a naturally occurring culinary ingredient. The question of a single food defining a culture is also at play: where French bread is thought of as an iconic national food, garlic, at least to the layman’s eye, lacks associations particular to specific regions, thus crossing boundaries and challenging the connections between food and how it contributes to the process of nation-making.

If bread is considered essential to the conceptualization of a cultural self in France, rice has the same, if not stronger, inextricable connotations with Japanese culture. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney explores this concept in the book *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities Through Time*. She writes, “Food tells not only how people live
but also how they think of themselves in relation to others” (3), distinguishing not just disparate nations but regional groups within the same country. In Japan, the ingredient as “the staple food” as well as its historical method of production and harvest (rice paddies) are important in shaping a cultural consciousness encompassing “rice as self and rice paddies as our land” (Ohnuki-Tierney 10). Interestingly, the process of wet-rice agriculture was not developed in Japan but adopted from other continental Asian nations, demonstrating “how the Japanese self was born through discourse with the other” (Ohnuki-Tierney 8; emphasis in the original). In addition to taking a historical view of rice as self, Ohnuki-Tierney examines the recent “internationalization” of ethnic foods and how this process reimagines cultural traditions and challenges the concept of authenticity. Foods typical to many formerly colonized nations have been integrated into the “daily cuisine” of the United Kingdom, and American fast food has been adopted in Japan and in many other cultures. Ohnuki-Tierney considers these “‘ethnic’ or ‘cultural’ revivals” indicative of “the urgent need of peoples to redefine their own identities” (4), which in this case is achieved through food as a metaphor for the construction of self.

These authors investigate the creation of a collective identity based on culturally relevant food items and their historical and modern associations with certain populations, methods of production, and literary representations. This study seeks to examine how the adoption and manipulation of garlic as a natural product through the many stages of its lifespan by French and Spanish people can be viewed in relation to the competition and collaboration between two seemingly distinct nations. It will consider differing modes and scales of garlic production in France and
Spain, both in the recent past and today; consumption trends in each country and how they relate to cultural self-concepts in geographically diverse areas in close proximity; and how the use of garlic in recipes that typify each country’s culinary tradition distinguish them, and thus their cultures, from one another. What does garlic, a plant that defies classification based on a single set of geographical or cultural associations, reveal about two specific countries whose physical nearness has had profound effects on how they interact and identify as individual entities and in relation to one another?

2. Production

The study of anthropology often approaches migration and diaspora trends through the lens of *emplacement*; this “notion of ‘place’ has traditionally been associated with bounded locality and contained cultures…which gives rise to critiques of a sedentarist bias which links people irrevocably to place” (Schwabe). The relationships that link people to place vary according to the time, manner, and context in which they developed; Schwabe argues that “place and space should not be thought of merely as passive backgrounds for people to act upon or ‘do something’ to, but as active partners in the construction of selves.” This connection between place and its effect on the formulation of identity also underlies this study of garlic, not only by linking people to place through a singular ingredient, but also by examining garlic itself as integrally linked to location. By its nature, garlic is situated within a particular context based on a given location’s natural and economic conditions. However, like other agricultural products, its origins in one place do not
necessitate that it remains there; more often (if not always), it is mobilized through ever-wider networks of trade and distribution, often, as modernization continues, on a global scale.

In spite of (and perhaps in response to) globalization, there exist classification systems regulated by political entities in France and Spain relating to agricultural production. Certain varieties of produce, including garlic, must adhere to varying degrees of standards to be granted a cultural appellation that assures their provenance from a particular region and their adherence to specific modes of production and harvest. This labeling process originated in the early 20th century, when new methods of production of wine created high yields that threatened the autonomy of small-scale farmers and the traditional practices that gave specific varieties of wine identifiable characteristics. In 1905, spurred by producers at well-known vineyards, a law was enacted that granted the French government the ability to define the geographical boundaries associated with the production of specific wines. A subsequent law written in 1919 redefined the relationship between ownership of the land and use of geographical appellation as subject to the judicial system; that is, the French courts could now penalize producers who did not adhere to the bounded standards for geographical appellation. Both of these laws had little or nothing to do with quality: rather, they sought to curb overproduction through appellation, but neither succeeded in doing so due to the lack of specific constraints put on producers. Publications that sought to manage production between 1927 and 1935 stipulated that appellations be “linked to the geographical origin and the conditions of production;” that regulation could occur through laws addressing irrigation and new vineyard plantation; and that
the market could intervene at the production level, that is, before the product left the farm (Albert 10).

The *Institut national des appellations d’origine* (INAO, now renamed the *Institut national de l’origine et de la qualité* but retaining the acronym) was created in 1935 to address continuing problems in the wine industry through a singular body of independent regulation. Thereafter, through a number of reconfigurations and expansions of the designations granted – including the change from a private entity to a government-regulated organization – the INAO began to take on the characteristics with which it is associated today, and in 1990 was granted the right to oversee all agricultural production. Perhaps the most significant transformation that took place during this time was the integration of a product’s quality, not just its place of origin, into its appellative label. For example, the *appellation d’origine contrôlée* (AOC) designation, one of the strictest sets of guidelines to which products must adhere, is intrinsically linked to the concept of *terroir*, a term loosely translated by Amy Trubek as the “taste of place” and as encompassing “place, taste, and practice” (17). Other governing bodies, such as the *Communauté européenne*, an economic organization that acts within many of the states that compose the European Union, oversee the bestowal of similar cultural appellations with varying degrees of regulatory standards; the *Communauté européenne* grants the *indication géographique protégée* (IGP) to a range of agricultural products, and the INAO’s *appellation d’origine protégée* (AOP) is similar to the AOC but less rigorous.

Many European countries adopted similar classification systems following the French model that still function today. Spain was unique in that its system developed
alongside that of the French, and aspects of it even preceded the French framework – namely, the denominations of Rioja and Sherry, both wines whose origins in particular regions of Spain have protected status. In other ways, the French and Spanish regulatory systems share many characteristics. They are both organized hierarchically and consist of branches that oversee various sectors of agricultural production. In broader terms, in their regulation of the quality and geographic origin of agricultural products, both systems seek to protect the reputation of certain products associated with a given region, shift the focus of economic and agricultural policy toward quality rather than output quantity, and promote rural development by “increas[ing] production, creat[ing] local jobs and reduc[ing] rural exodus” (O’Connor and Company).

In spite of the breadth of these distinctions, there remains a disconnect in the case of garlic between the variety of types that exist and the awareness of these types on the part of the average consumer. Different varieties are often indistinguishable in supermarkets, which offer mainly Chinese or Spanish strains with no more description than “white garlic,” and which can often be bland after having been held for long periods of time in cold storage. Thus, consumers are most often unintentionally ignorant of the diversity of garlic types, and of the fact that garlic can have different taste profiles at all. Trade globalization is in part to thank for this phenomenon, which opposes the reality that “there are as many types of garlic as places garlic is grown” (Hargreaves). Spain, one of the top global producers and exporters of garlic, is facing this problem directly as production in China in recent years has taken off. Still, Alexis Mul of Ibergarlic SI, a garlic production, packing,
and export company whose main customers are supermarkets in the UK and Scandinavia, contends that despite the challenge Chinese garlic has posed recently in relation to Spanish and other markets, it does not threaten to edge out Spanish varieties entirely (“Market still good for Spanish garlic despite Chinese import”). Customers might be attracted to Chinese garlic for its uniform shape and color, but connoisseurs will continue to buy Spanish garlic for its sharper flavor and durability, both of which contribute to its overall better quality.

3. Consumption

The European Union, established in the late 1950s to “foster economic cooperation in the aftermath of the Second World War” (“How the EU Works”), counted France among its six founding members; Spain joined after a number of enlargements to the community in 1986. Ideological developments and policy expansions that took place over the years included the creation of the agricultural branch of the EU in 1962 to counter the challenges of international competition, climate change, and decreasing productivity in the rural sector through cooperation among farmers across regions. Consistent with the goals of the broader organization, the EU’s common agricultural policy seeks to integrate the farming sectors of multiple countries in the pursuit of a singular set of objectives; these include generating a “diversified rural economy,” maintaining Europe’s competitive edge on the global food market, and “promoting innovation in farming and food processing…to increase productivity and reduce environmental impacts” (“Agriculture”). In this way, the EU’s agricultural division works to build a unified
nation by way of the consolidation of regional operations under the aegis of the European Union itself. The recent prevalence of Chinese garlic represents a threat to this goal: as the export and sale of Chinese garlic gains traction in the global market, other countries must find ways to defend their own production output. In response, the European Commission has established regulations that limit the importation per ton of Chinese garlic to all EU member countries (U.S. International Trade Commission), a tactic that exemplifies the EU’s “common approach towards supporting agriculture [in order to] ensure fair conditions for farmers competing in the internal European market and globally” (European Commission 6).

The ajo morado de Las Pedroñeras, grown in the Castilla-La Mancha region of southern Spain, is the only variety of Spanish garlic with protected geographical status, recognized by the European Union in 2001. A number of cooperatives have been formed to ensure its protection and continued success, particularly in the face of China’s burgeoning presence on the global market. In spite of the EU’s reciprocal efforts, a 2012 conflict between the EU and independent farmers from Castilla-La Mancha and other regions in Spain exemplifies how sensitive this campaign has become in recent years. An agreement with Morocco ratified by the EU relaxed regulations on the importation of agricultural products from that country, causing a disturbance among Spanish farmers of oil, fruits, and vegetables, even though the numbers per ton of many of these products labeled “sensitive” due to their importance to the Spanish economy (among these tomatoes, zucchini, strawberries, and garlic) saw a less increased allowance than other products. The different relationships
between Morocco and many EU member countries are part of the problem; an article published in the Spanish periodical *El País* states,

Según los términos de este acuerdo, el mismo va a suponer un claro beneficio para los países del norte y centro de la UE al disponer de frutas y hortalizas más baratas por el aumento de la oferta. Igualmente será bueno para esos mismos países, Francia, Alemania, Países Bajos o Reino Unido que exportan a Marruecos cereales, aceite de semillas, derivados lácteos o de la carne. España es el principal país perjudicado por la coincidencia en producciones y periodos de producción con Marruecos y sus escasas exportaciones. (Maté)

For their part, the IGP has appealed to the consumer directly in their efforts to preserve Spanish garlic’s competitive edge, producing short humorous videos that distinguish Chinese garlic from Las Pedroñeras’ *ajo morado.* Dolores Suárez, the president of La Asociación IGP Ajo Morado de Las Pedroñeras, asserts that this and similar actions work to “contrarrestar la enorme competencia de otras variedades foráneas, que están desplazando a nuestro producto autóctono de los hábitos de compra” (ASComunicación).

In spite of the fact that a greater number of French garlic strains are protected under geographical appellations, French garlic farmers, who export internationally on a smaller scale, face competition from both Spanish and Chinese varieties. Following a year of low yields combined with an above average Spanish harvest and continued rivalry with China, French farmers and union members from the Cadours region agreed in 2013 to sell their products at a fixed minimum price at one local market (Pech). The next year, after a fight that lasted well over a decade, *l’ail violet de Cadours* was granted AOC status by the INAO, another step that farmers and syndicate members hope will mitigate competition (Haudebourg).

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2 This series of videos can be viewed on the IGP’s website at [http://www.igpajomorado.es/portals/igpajomorado/landing/index.html](http://www.igpajomorado.es/portals/igpajomorado/landing/index.html).
For every country that produces garlic, the plant is consumed by an even broader population. Carol Helstotsky contends that “food habits should be viewed as communicative processes encompassing whole societies, with important distinctions to be made between economic classes or populations from diverse regions” (9). As such, a view of consumption patterns and what they reveal about a given people necessitates a study of not only the countries in question but also the boundaries that come between them. In Europe specifically, these boundaries are largely determined by the European Union, an institution that continues to evolve today, integrating certain countries that petition to join it, inviting others in, and rejecting others still. Despite the overarching aim of the EU to act as a unifying force, the borders that exist among the many regions that compose it play a role in the construction of an ideologically and economically unified nation. Scholars have addressed the idea of nation building through distinct approaches. In the essay “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?”, Ernest Renan considers concepts like race, religion, and language to not be independently indicative of what constitutes a nation. Rather, he defines a nation as follows:

Une nation est une âme, un principe spirituel. Deux choses qui, à vrai dire, n’en font qu’une, constituent cette âme, ce principe spirituel. L’une est dans le passé, l’autre dans le présent. L’une est la possession en commun d’un riche legs de souvenirs ; l’autre est le consentement actuel, le désir de vivre ensemble, la volonté de continuer à faire valoir l’héritage qu’on a reçu indivis...La nation, comme l’individu, est l’aboutissant d’un long passé d’efforts, de sacrifices et de dévouements. Le culte des ancêtres est de tous le plus légitime ; les ancêtres nous ont faits ce que nous sommes. Un passé héroïque, des grands hommes, de la gloire (j’entends de la véritable), voilà le capital social sur lequel on assied une idée nationale. Avoir des gloires communes dans le passé, une volonté commune dans le présent ; avoir fait de grandes choses ensemble, vouloir en faire encore, voilà les conditions essentielles pour être un peuple. (Renan 28)
This “spiritual” analysis focuses on an ideological harmony inherent to the creation of a unified nation, and like his discussion of racial and religious factors, Renan views geographical boundaries – what he calls “frontières naturelles” – as playing less of a role in the conception of a people than does man. How, then, do natural products like garlic that span these frontiers and their manipulation by man contribute to the formation of distinct national identities?

Peter Sahlins expands on Renan’s view in his study of the Pyrenees as a natural boundary whose political division defined Spanish and French constructions of identity. The Treaty of the Pyrenees, enacted in 1659 in response to tensions lingering between Spain and France from the Thirty Years’ War, established the Pyrenees mountain range as the dividing line between the two nations. Sahlins describes how this geographical division affected the political makeup of the Cerdanya region that sat between the two nations. After the division, the Cerdans were forced to align themselves with the ideologies of the resulting French or Spanish sides; stripped of their once unique character, they “developed a rhetoric of national identity that masked their own interests and appealed to the ideals of government officials” (Sahlins 269). Even so, the Cerdans “affirmed their nationality without abandoning a local sense of place; indeed, their national identities were grounded in the affirmation and defense of social and territorial boundaries against outsiders” (Sahlins 269) which played out in their relations with “political amphibians” able to choose different identities in the transitional region and with other communities that represented a challenge to the limited ecological resources. Sahlins therefore emphasizes the importance of the “us/them” dichotomy to the “development and
expression of ethnic, communal, and national identities…in the French-Spanish borderland” (9) of the seventeenth century. A similar mentality can be adopted when examining the distinction between French and Spanish styles of cuisine, a topic that inspires fierce competition for its significance in the formation of a national identity. How does this dichotomy apply to something like garlic, a singular ingredient that can be used differently to express a diversity of regional cuisines and tastes?

In the article “State, Nation, National Identity, and Citizenship: France as a Test Case,” William Safran argues that France, more than other countries, has enjoyed a more secure and congruous conception of what defines “Frenchness” thanks to “a long history of political unification and…the existence of durable national frontiers” (220). However, more recently, a number of factors have led to a “reexamination” of this determinative ideology. These include the extensive postwar influx of non-European immigrants into French society that were not as easily “francisé” (Safran 223) as earlier immigrants from Italy, Germany, Poland, and the like; the motivation of these immigrants to adopt French culture for its economic opportunities rather than its purported political values; and challenges to the lifestyle, language, and “a nationally specific cuisine” that have resulted from “the spread of a common Western European culture, a development fostered by the institutional growth of the European Community” (Safran 223).

Safran’s mention of cuisine brings us back to the question of how political and geographical boundaries are important in determining how ingredients are thought about and used differently in distinct cultures. The link he draws between nation building and food falls under the umbrella of food politics, an area of study that has
gained traction in recent years thanks to its inextricable connection with ever more pertinent environmental concerns. At its most basic, food politics pertains to the relationship between political entities and various aspects of the process of food distribution, from production to consumption. More specifically, Robert Paarlberg argues that the food politics of a given country often mirrors that country’s political structure, and thus becomes a local issue. He writes, “Despite the growth of international food markets, roughly 90 percent of all food never enters international trade. It is still consumed within the same country where it was produced” (4). This is especially true “in poor agricultural countries, [where] a great deal of the food supply is still consumed within the same community that produced it, or even by the same individual who produced it” (Paarlberg 4). As such, the food systems at work in a given country are largely shaped by that country’s unique political agenda and priorities, which seldom overlap with those of other nations. How does Chinese garlic, a product that has cut across boundaries in recent years, fit into or resist this trend and represent a redefining of food politics in an industrializing world?

In the case of most foodstuffs, the distinction between boundaries makes it tempting to associate a certain set of recipes with one place; indeed, in most historical and anthropological approaches, one edible product is often seen as having a necessary singular link to one nation. Susan Terrio equates France and chocolate (and also mentions the association of France and bread); Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney chooses rice as definitive of the Japanese self; and Carol Helstotsky describes the connection between garlic and olive oil and Italian food politics, arguing that the simplicity of Italian cuisine, now regarded as admirable in its restraint, was born out of historical
necessity. In this sense, garlic is a sort of anomaly in that it is produced, transformed through cooking, and consumed across borders and boundaries, and therefore defies the idea of an ingredient being linked with a certain nation and defining that nation’s cultural self-concept.

4. Taste

The link between food and culture is inescapable; it is the process of transformation through cooking that differentiates mere consumption from the enjoyment of food. In *Le cru et le cuit*, Claude Lévi-Strauss contends that certain basic oppositions like raw and cooked can act as lenses through which to study and develop more theoretical principles, writing, “Le but de ce livre est de montrer comment des catégories empiriques telles que celles de cru et de cuit, de frais et de pourri, de mouillé et de brûlé, etc…peuvent…servir d’outils conceptuels pour dégager des notions abstraites et les enchaîner en propositions” (9). Although this approach has been refuted by many scholars since as overly dualistic, there is merit to the idea that a food, having been altered through organic processes, can be viewed in relation to its natural state as significant and suggestive of broader systems or truths. Following Lévi-Strauss’ argument, garlic, raw and untouched, can be seen as a singular product with discrete properties; prepared in different styles, the cooking of garlic becomes a performance of otherness, its use in certain dishes indicative of a transformation of nature into culture.

Various scholars contend that the invention of cooking by man distinguishes us from animals and represents our advancement as a civilized population. Felipe
Fernández-Armesto devotes the full first chapter of his study on the history of food to the invention of cooking, although he recognizes the ambiguities of the word: cultivation can be thought of as cooking, and if “animals with suitably robust stomachs prepare their food by chewing the cud[,] why should this not be classed as cooking” (4)? Still, the use of fire to transform an agricultural product into a food consumable by man is unique “not because of the way it transforms food…but because of the way it transformed society” (Fernández-Armesto 4), introducing eating centered around community and “predictable mealtimes” (meals as ritual) and incorporating community into the act of cooking itself. The invention of cooking therefore categorizes food as not only something that nourishes, but something that shapes society and distinguishes peoples.

Massimo Montanari takes the connotation of food and culture further, arguing that food is not intrinsically related to culture, but rather that our interactions with food and ingredients are what define us culturally. He writes,

Food becomes culture when it is prepared because, once the basic products of his diet have been acquired, man transforms them by means of fire and a carefully wrought technology that is expressed in the practices of the kitchen. Food is culture when it is eaten because, once the basic products of his diet have been acquired, man transforms them by means of fire and a carefully wrought technology that is expressed in the practices of the kitchen. Food is culture when it is eaten because man, while able to eat anything, or precisely for this reason, does not in fact eat everything but rather chooses his own food, according to criteria linked either to the economic and nutritional dimensions of the gesture or to the symbolic values with which food itself is invested. Through such pathways food takes shape as a decisive element of human identity and as one of the most effective means of expressing and communicating that identity. (Montanari xi-xii; emphasis in the original)

What’s more, Montanari classifies taste – the way we ultimately interact with food and the basis on which we imbue it with meaning – as a cultural product, arguing that “the organ of taste is not the tongue, but the brain, a culturally (and therefore
historically) determined organ through which are transmitted and learned the criteria for evaluations” (Montanari 61). This is why taste varies not only among geographical regions and peoples but also among eras; why a dish or flavor prized in one culture or time can be reviled in another.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes’ series of essays that examine how social values and phenomena contribute to the creation of widely held cultural myths, the author studies two pairings of foodstuffs that typify French culture – wine and milk and steak and *frites* – and suggests their relevance in determining the Frenchman’s self-concept. Barthes argues that “le vin n’est pas seulement philtre, il est aussi acte durable de boire; le geste a ici une valeur décorative” (70; emphasis in the original). Wine is not limited to its condition as a drinkable substance; rather, it encompasses a certain lifestyle and long held traditions specific to the French. Steak, too, as something cooked and eaten in different ways, represents “à la fois une nature et une morale…il participe à tous les rythmes, au confortable repas bourgeois et au casse-croûte bohème du célibataire; c’est la nourriture à la fois expéditive et dense, il accomplit le meilleur rapport possible entre l’économie et l’efficacité, la mythologie et la plasticité de sa consommation” (Barthes 73-4). As wine is crafted, steak is cooked, and the act of its being cooked in certain ways and consumed in certain settings at once distinguishes cultural particularities (like those associated with class, as Barthes suggests here) and intimates the potential of an ingredient to blur these differences. In much the same way, the transformation through cooking to produce distinct dishes with unique taste profiles differentiates garlic’s usage in a given cuisine. Reading about cooking, like reading about food in general, illuminates
particularities of taste and methodology that can help to distinguish one culture from another.

With this concept in mind, I chose three basic preparations and dishes typical of Spanish and French cuisine to compare, with an explicit view on how they integrate or leave out garlic. As the recipes I chose are part of each culture’s long-held culinary tradition, many modern variations on them exist. As often as possible, the recipes I drew from were from Spanish and French sources, some more austere and some updated with modern touches. More than the source itself, I looked for similarities in type and ratio of ingredients and in cooking methods. In such a way, I sought to create what I thought of as a classic version of each dish by combining recipes from various print and online sources. Certainly, as this essay demonstrates, authority in labeling what is considered “classic” in cooking is not universal. Rather, the act of cooking or creating a dish reflects decisions and gestures that are informed by society, history, politics, and the evolution of these and other spheres. Thus, my interpretation of what makes these dishes classic is constructed relative to my understanding of a particular theoretical framework drawn from the various authors I have cited here.

The first preparation is the most basic: not a dish in itself, but the foundation of many classic recipes in French and Spanish cuisine. In French it is called *mirepoix*, and in Spanish (and Latin American cultures) *sofrito*. The basics of each preparation are similar: a combination of aromatics in particular proportions is cooked together slowly to create a flavor base that can be used in a variety of dishes that are representative of each cuisine. For instance, many classic French stews and soups like
coq au vin and boeuf bourguignon start with mirepoix; similarly, Spanish paella and gazpacho use a base of sofrito to achieve their distinctive flavor. In my experience, the ingredients that compose both bases say as much about each culture as the method of cooking they involve.

This idea recalls Montanari’s discussion of the “grammar of food” and its relation to our ability to choose what and how we eat. If the “repertory of available animal and vegetable products” to which we have access forms a particular “lexicon” that defines our cultural relationship to food, our adoption or rejection of certain products is indicative of “individual or collective tastes or…cultural choices” (Montanari 99). However, Montanari insists that “these differences do not preclude a common language” (100); in fact, the distinct choices we make may be essential for understanding our shared culinary vocabulary, as in the case of monks in the Middle Ages who, unable to eat meat following monastic directives, were only made more aware of its value through their abstinence. The perception of animal products as “the most prestigious, nourishing and agreeable of foods” (Montanari 100) was the same basis for the monks who rejected them as for those who ate meat precisely for its status as such. Garlic, then, and its inclusion or absence in fundamental French and Spanish cooking techniques, may reveal a shared system of cultural values more than one of discrepancies.

Indeed, the most obvious distinction between mirepoix and sofrito is the absence of garlic in the former French recipe. A classic mirepoix consists of two parts onion to one part each carrot and celery, all minced to a uniform size and sautéed in butter. Cooked over low heat until it is softened and translucent but does not brown,
the mixture this recipe produces is subtle with a slightly sweet flavor. It is easy to imagine it being incorporated into a number of French dishes where it will enhance but not overpower them.

Spanish sofrito is an altogether different story: its flavors are bolder, its preparation more crude. A traditional recipe might consist of a sweet red pepper, one whole onion, a few cloves of garlic, a good amount of fresh or canned tomato, and cilantro. These ingredients are coarsely chopped and cooked over medium heat in olive oil until they thicken and the liquid from the tomatoes reduces. Besides the notable inclusion of garlic in the Spanish dish, the fact that sofrito is cooked in olive oil rather than butter suggests a tendency in French cooking toward a subtler, more muted appearance and flavor profile. This nuance and precision is also apparent in the manner in which the ingredients of each dish are prepared for cooking: all the recipes I read for mirepoix directed the reader to chop individual ingredients to a uniform size, which sometimes depended on the heartiness of the eventual dish that they would compose but was often a small mince, while Spanish recipes had more varied ingredients lists (some omitted cilantro, some added aromatic spices like thyme or bay leaves), relied less on specific ratios of one ingredient to another, and instructed the reader to roughly chop all ingredients before throwing them together in the pot. Even the appearance of sofrito is more arresting than that of mirepoix: whereas the components of the French recipe meld together into an almost uniform shade and consistency, the basic ingredients and the manner of cooking sofrito in oil give it a deeper, more vivid color. Like Barthes’ depiction of wine and milk as representative opposites based on their appearance – milk in French culture has become “le véritable
anti-vin” (Barthes 72) precisely because its unique molecular makeup makes it distinct in color and consistency from wine – the visual contrast in color and texture of *mirepoix* and *sofrito* is striking (see fig. 4).

Fig. 4: A comparison of Spanish *sofrito* (left) and French *mirepoix* (right)

The second set of recipes I tested were the most similar to one another and lie somewhere between bases and complete dishes. Both cultures count an array of sauces as an essential part of their cuisine; I compared French *aïoli* to Spanish *allioli*. Besides a possible tendency to use a bit more garlic in the Spanish recipes I came across, the basic difference between *aïoli* and *allioli* is the use of an egg yolk as a binder in the French recipe. This was debated by some of the sources I read, which claimed the addition of an egg yolk is a modern touch that makes the emulsification of the garlic and olive oil easier. Even so, I found both recipes very difficult to achieve by hand in the traditional method using a mortar and pestle. My first attempt at Provençal *aïoli* using a whisk didn’t come together, and even when I tried to fix it,
switching out the whisk for an electric hand mixer and adding another egg yolk, the mixture remained split. I wasn’t able to complete an authentic Spanish *allioli* because my mortar and pestle was too small, but both recipes are notoriously difficult and many attempts have been made at streamlining them through the use of other ingredients (sometimes bread or potato) or tools (some people insist using a food processor creates the most consistent sauce).

The basic process is this: garlic is ground to a paste with salt in the bottom of a mortar and pestle until it reaches a uniform consistency. Olive oil is added in a steady stream while the whole mixture gets continuously beaten. Ideally, if the olive oil is added at the correct speed and the mixture is beaten gently and steadily, the ingredients will emulsify to create a thick, rich paste. Lemon juice is often added to brighten the flavor of the mayonnaise-like mixture.

Both recipes are notable for the fact that they are not cooked over fire. This does not contest their status as recipes, but rather brings to mind the meaning of the term “cooking” as explored by Fernández-Armesto, who contends that the importance of transforming food through fire lies in its social effects, not just in the method. Although using flame to alter food was revolutionary, methods as simple as hanging meat or other products to dry or burying to induce fermentation can be equally qualified as forms of cooking (Fernández-Armesto 4). Likewise, the steady beating of *aïoli* and *allioli* to create a uniform mixture out of once distinct parts, and the frequent addition of acid, are ways of altering a dish – indeed, cooking something that started out raw – without the use of fire. Montanari takes the connotations of the raw still further, arguing that the conscious decision to eat uncooked food reflects a desire to
“draw nearer to the animal condition” (Montanari 43), a choice not innate but learned and therefore just as reflective of cultural preferences as the alternative. Indeed, recent dietary trends that espouse the unparalleled health benefits of an entirely raw diet (which Montanari refers to on page 71) support this claim.

The final French and Spanish recipes I compared were the most complex and complete, and both good examples of how garlic is used in dishes typical of each culture. Despite the similarities suggested by their names, the French garlic soup and Spanish-style garlic and bread soup I made came out strikingly differently from one another, and were also distinctive in their ingredients and in how they were cooked. Again, the use of a particular set of ingredients and method of cooking, as well as how each dish integrates garlic, is indicative of an elemental difference between how Spanish and French cultures interact with and exhibit their identity through food.

Like before, both of the recipes I followed to produce these dishes were a combination of various similar recipes with one main recipe as a starting point. The first, a French *soupe à l’ail*, consisted of the following ingredients:

1 quart water
1 bay leaf
2 sage leaves
3/4 tsp. fresh thyme
12-15 medium garlic cloves, chopped
1 tsp. fine grain sea salt
1 whole egg plus 2 egg yolks
1 1/2 oz. freshly grated Parmesan cheese
Freshly ground black pepper
1/4 cup olive oil
The method was as follows: Bring the water to a boil, adding the garlic and spices and reducing the heat. Allow the mixture to simmer for 40 minutes. While the mixture is on the stove, create a binding element by whisking together the egg and yolks, cheese, and black pepper, then slowly adding the olive oil, stirring constantly (this step reminded me a bit of the *aïoli*/*allioli* preparation). Finally, remove the bay leaf and sage from the garlic-water mixture and slowly add a ladleful of the broth into the eggs, continuing to stir, before adding the whole mixture back to the broth and whisking over low heat until the soup thickens slightly. To serve, some recipes suggest pouring the soup over chunks of torn bread and adding a touch more olive oil to finish.

In comparison, the recipe for Spanish *sopa de ajo* used these ingredients:

1/4 cup olive oil
10-12 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
6 oz. country bread, torn into 1/2" chunks
1 tbsp. hot paprika
1/2 cup dry white wine
4 cups chicken stock
2 eggs, lightly beaten
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 tbsp. finely chopped parsley

To make the soup, fry the sliced garlic in the oil over medium-high heat until it is golden brown in color. Add the bread and paprika, coating the bread and stirring until it is lightly toasted. Add the wine and continue cooking until it is absorbed by the bread (this happened quickly for me, and may depend on the type of bread used). Stir in the chicken stock and bring to a boil, then add the beaten eggs while continuing to stir so that they form ribbon-like strands in the broth. Season with salt and pepper and garnish with parsley to serve.

The soupe à l’ail is notable for how much longer it took to come together than its Spanish counterpart, and the flavors of the final dishes could not have been more different in spite of some similarities between both recipes (such as the addition of
bread and eggs as thickeners). The way that each recipe treated garlic produced wildly different flavors at the end: simmering the garlic in water in the French preparation mellowed its pungency and brought out its sweetness, while frying it in oil as the first step of the Spanish recipe did the opposite, and the final *sopa de ajo* had a much more pronounced, sharper garlic flavor. The use of chicken broth as a base rather than water in the Spanish version also produced a more complex dish (to my taste): in the French soup, I found that the addition of the egg and cheese mixture at the end overpowered the flavor of the garlic-water broth, creating more of a cheesy sauce to sop up the bread (the garlicky taste came out a bit more after the soup had sat in the fridge overnight). The *sopa de ajo*, on the other hand, had a good balance of garlic and other flavors associated with the Spanish cooking tradition like tomato and paprika. The fact that these seemingly similar recipes involved different methods of cooking to produce distinct flavor profiles is akin to Montanari’s discussion of roasting versus boiling, be it of meat or vegetables. As revelatory as the decision to add or omit particular ingredients is, “the cultural tensions implicit in culinary preparations are such that they cannot be ideologically neutral” either (Montanari 47).

Another classic Spanish recipe that relies heavily on garlic in its ingredient list is *ajoblanco*, a chilled gazpacho-style white soup whose main ingredients are garlic, bread, and blanched almonds. Soaking the bread and adding olive oil as well as water to the broth produces a silkier soup often served with green grapes and additional almonds. I chose to focus on the more savory *sopa de ajo* instead because its method of being cooked over a flame and eaten hot made it more comparable to the French *soupe à l’ail*. However, recent attempts at producing a modernized *ajoblanco* in the
world of molecular gastronomy bring up a whole new side to flavor and what taste means in a people’s cultural consciousness.

In Montanari’s discussion of taste as a cultural product, the author suggests that modern European cuisine seeks to respect the inherent flavor of a natural product wherever possible (Montanari 62). This notion, he says, is the result of a seventeenth-to eighteenth-century French line of thought sparked by Nicola de Bonnfons, cited as stating in his *Letters to Household Managers* that “cabbage soup should taste of cabbage, leeks of leek, turnips of turnip” (qtd. in Montanari 63). This is particularly interesting considering the culinary revolution involving molecular gastronomy and associated styles of cooking that has swept Spain in recent years.

The concept of molecular gastronomy emerged in the late 1980s as a way to bring the science of cooking into restaurants and the home. Though by no means a philosophy invented by the Spaniards (and despite the fact that he considers the term a misnomer when applied to his own cuisine) (De Solier 162), some argue that the Spanish chef Ferran Adrià’s restaurant El Bulli introduced molecular gastronomy to the masses. At El Bulli, the menu consists of twenty-five to fifty small plates, and the sensory and tactile experience of the diners, which may include anything from the atmosphere of the surrounding restaurant to the cutlery used, is as important as the food itself. In a stark contrast to de Bonnfons’ statement, many of the dishes taste recognizable but have an unfamiliar appearance or texture (this is especially evident in the famous foams the El Bulli team created using liquid nitrogen) – thus, a dish that tastes of leeks may appear to contain no leeks at all, or the presence of leeks in a
dish might be a catalyst for the development of a more prominent flavor dependent on the chemical combination of leeks and another ingredient.

This innovative style of cooking and its success in the modern culinary world is indicative of a broader psychological evolution that relates to how we think about food and taste. As before, we may expect certain aspects of a dish characteristic of a particular culture to be consistent, for example in appearance, ingredients, or flavor. Molecular gastronomy often dissociates these aspects from one another (for instance, looks may not reveal an expected flavor) or from the culture in question, thereby challenging our expectations of a dish’s national characteristics. If garlic is routinely fried in olive oil in the Spanish culinary tradition to imbue national dishes with a certain character, the *ajoblanco* created by Ferran Adrià in his lab/kitchen challenges our centuries-old expectations of how garlic is used universally to impart a particular texture and flavor as a base in Spanish cooking.

5. Conclusion

Viewing garlic as a natural product that is transformed through the processes of production, consumption, and cooking (or taste), one might think it possible to determine what these processes reflect about the specific cultural contexts in which they are performed. The differences between recipes – the ingredients they call for, the meticulousness they demand, and indeed, how they incorporate garlic – can be considered culturally relevant to Spanish and French conceptions of how food shapes identity. A scientific explanation might account for these differences on the basis of one country’s soil being more supportive of the growth and harvest of garlic as an
abundant crop. Still, it is tempting, particularly in light of the nature of what has been written on the subject, to go beyond this natural interpretation and lean on a generalized reasoning connecting an ingredient’s use and how it reflects culture: could the French be more rigid and demanding of precision in their demeanor and preferences compared to looser Spain? Could the Frenchman’s more delicate tastes evince a similarly keen preference for the subtleties of literature and art? Could the bolder flavors associated with Spanish cooking mean that the Spanish are more adventurous or forward thinking while the French honor long-held tradition?

As it turns out, such a link is impossible to draw on the grounds of food alone. In fact, what was perhaps most interesting about testing recipes through this process – both preparing and consuming them – was the realization that the experience of eating garlic in its various iterations does just the opposite. Cooking a recipe from a particular culture can be considered a manner of materializing its unique or disparate elements, creating tangible artifacts of the culture in question and thus being able to distinguish manifold peoples by way of their varied preferences, histories, and practices. But when you think about the moment of eating, the act more often than not unravels this conception of a conclusive practice; biting into anything, but especially into the garlic-laden creations that are the legacies of two rich and unique culinary traditions, produces a profusion of flavors and associations, making definitive evidence seem hardly possible on the basis of mere eating. A mouthful of gambas al ajillo or a taste of escargots à la bourguignonne defy easy categorization and uncover the many and layered meanings, values, and representations of this versatile allium.
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