

Theorizing Authenticity: Introduction to the Special Section

“THEORIZING AUTHENTICITY” CONTRIBUTES TO understanding the proliferation of authenticity in popular cultural and market arenas, a phenomenon reflected in the quantity and value of craft and heritage foods globally. The special section provides a place to explore how producers fashion authenticity through creative labor. The four articles in this section focus on the figure of the Italian artisanal producer¹ and as such explore how individuals create value in global capitalist markets through the practices they perform to produce food as well as the stories they tell about their skill, creativity, and geography. The figure also allows the authors to remain cognizant that wielding authenticity is not an equally distributed possibility in today’s societies. Such privilege is rarely afforded to the innovators or to immigrant communities—the kabob maker in Perugia, Italy, can never be “authentic” (Nowak 2012). Those of us studying, writing, and thinking about food find authenticity suspect at best, but it persists—even through a pandemic—and food seems to be its most noble vehicle. In this special section, we confront authenticity head on while remaining skeptical of the impulse to attach simple good versus bad moral values to authenticity narratives.

This special section comes out of a panel we originally organized for the 2020 American Anthropological Association (AAA) meetings, scheduled in St. Louis, where the first author was resident and the co-author was born, but the meetings were canceled due to COVID-19. The panel finally came to fruition in November 2021 in Baltimore. Like everyone else, we had been changed over a year and a half of isolation and separation. Separation not just from our panel, but from our research sites, from our in-person classes, from our rituals of commensality. While this separation was difficult and painful, it also expanded our interest in, and exploration of, authenticity in life in general and food in particular.

During the lockdown, debates about the authenticity of foods amplified, especially for those of us who maintained

our livelihoods during the economic instability of COVID-19. And it was in the context of instability that nostalgia and authenticity came together in tense ways through food. As food writer Tanushree Bhowmik explained, “What came along with the deluge of traditional food was the debate on authenticity” (Bhowmik 2020). This debate coincided with the pandemic affecting Italians especially hard early on, transforming spaces of authenticity into geographies of crisis.

Even before the pandemic, Italians were engaging in discourse about foods, marketing local foodways as authentic. Given the market share of Italian craft food, Italian politicians were also adamant that a simple definition of authenticity exists and can be attached to foods; take, for example, the mayor of the city of Bologna, which is located in central Italy. In 2019, he went to Twitter to ask Italian citizens living abroad a favor. “Dear citizens, I’m collecting photos of spaghetti alla bolognese in circulation across the globe as a type of fake news . . . Send me yours” (Castrodale and Pollack 2019). According to the mayor, spaghetti bolognese did not exist in Italy. He made this claim even though writers such as Bologna native Piero Valdiserra have explained that the people of Bologna have consumed dried pasta for hundreds of years and probably even put ragù on it (Kirchgaessner 2016).

The authors in this special section, who all research foodways in Italy, would probably scream: “But spaghetti bolognese *does* exist!”—at least in places like the United States, Canada, Argentina, and the United Kingdom. At the same time, most of us who work in Italy on food often talk about authenticity with our families and friends (Parasecoli 2017: 8). We are bombarded with questions about the authentic dishes we consumed while living in Italy. As scholars of culture first, we learned quickly what people didn’t want to hear: what we actually ate in Italy. We rarely brought up the Chinese hot pot, the Japanese sushi, or the halal hamburgers. It’s a curious thing: they wanted authenticity.

Authenticity permeates the foodscape in tangible ways. European Union nation-states dominate place-based labeling—also known as Geographical Indications (GIs). Products labeled with the GIs contribute a total €75 billion to EU countries (European Commission 2021). Italy is a major powerhouse in this regard, holding a total of 850 GIs, of which 291 are categorized as agricultural products and foodstuffs and 559 as wines and spirits (ItalianFood.net 2020). Risk of fraud in the luxury end of these products is noteworthy. For example, a consortium of cheese makers developed a digital tracking chip to authenticate Parmigiano Reggiano, a product known as the “king” of Italian cheeses that carries a high-status Geographical Indication known as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO). Its estimated “global turnover of counterfeit” is said to be worth \$2 billion (Southey 2022).

This economic portrait provides a backdrop against which the authors grapple with authenticity from both personal and professional vantages across three major themes that intersect and influence one another. First, authors investigate the modern exclusions that arise from authenticity. They ask questions about who can participate and when. Second, authors deal with how to define authenticity and find that markets are a good place to start. They ask, how do artisanal producers—of salami, cheese, olive oils, figs—navigate and define their work? We find that many artisanal producers use diverse terms to think about their own contributions to authenticity. Many of the artisanal producers we meet in this special section straddle discipline and improvisation and demonstrate a healthy skepticism toward authenticity. Third, authors demonstrate that authenticity nevertheless helps artisanal producers make sense of their place in a multispecies world. They focus on how humans interact with a multitude of species to make claims to authentic products, lives, and experiences.

A (Partial) History of Authenticity—European Beginnings, Colonial Connections

The Mayor of Bologna works to construct a place, a geography where dishes have existed or haven’t in the same way since time immemorial. Let’s explore how authenticity came to be today through a history of the term “terroir.” Terroir, a French term translated as taste of place (Trubek 2009) is often applied to “authentic” foods and beverages. The term was first applied to wine but has since expanded to other alcoholic beverages and now foods. David Beriss (2019) explains there is no simple connection to place, explaining that terroir “renders invisible a variety of conflicts” and, just as importantly, histories (63).

Food historian Rachel Laudan (2004) argues that the strategic use of terroir in the 1800s gave rise to contemporary forms of culinary modernism dominated by governmental and nongovernmental institutions. Laudan shows that terroir, and its application to French wines, was not a natural phenomenon but one embedded in structures of colonialism. Laudan focuses on the concerted efforts to create the French Terroir Strategy, or the cohesive, targeted approach to market French wines as the best in the world (Laudan 2004; Parasecoli 2017). Terroir would form the basis for the structure of Geographical Indications (GIs) today.

French winemakers and the colonial government aggressively executed the terroir strategy during the 1855 World’s Fair (Parasecoli 2017: 57). And just in time, too, because in the 1860s American vines planted in Europe brought a pest known as phylloxera to European grape vines, which decimated European autochthonous grape varieties. While phylloxera ravaged vineyards in Europe, winemakers in French colonies began producing mass quantities of wine to export to France, establishing a global wine market. The solution to the pest wouldn’t come until 1888, when a Texan grape variety was grafted onto French vines (Gale 2011).

Shortly after the French wine industry began to recover, winemakers in one colony, Algeria, began producing some of the best wines in the world that also happened to be cheaper than that of their French counterparts (Dhenin 2022). The burgeoning Algerian wine industry led to a moral dilemma because it complicated the civilizing mission of French colonial rule. To alleviate this paradox, the French Terroir Strategy was developed during “Algerian viticulture’s ‘golden age,’” and was explicitly meant to exclude Algeria (Guy 2010: 233). The work to highlight the myth of terroir made France *the* place to find wine.

The French Terroir Strategy helped “promoters [create] scarcity and high prices” (Laudan 2004: 138) and justified, to some extent, colonial rule. Terroir evolved to become something precious, a certain *je ne sais quoi* found exclusively in the soils, climates, and lands special to Europe. We concede that the codified connection between place and production makes “no sense as history” (Laudan 2004: 138), but rather is a space to examine the vestiges of colonial power structures that endure.

Wine was just the beginning in a major cultural turn to “proclaiming that certain foodstuffs or meals were inextricably tied to specific places and to mythic histories” (Laudan 2004: 138). In the twentieth century, terroir was formalized into a very specific kind of intellectual property law: the Geographical Indication. GI labels² are appearing more and more on grocery store shelves, and tout authentic production and

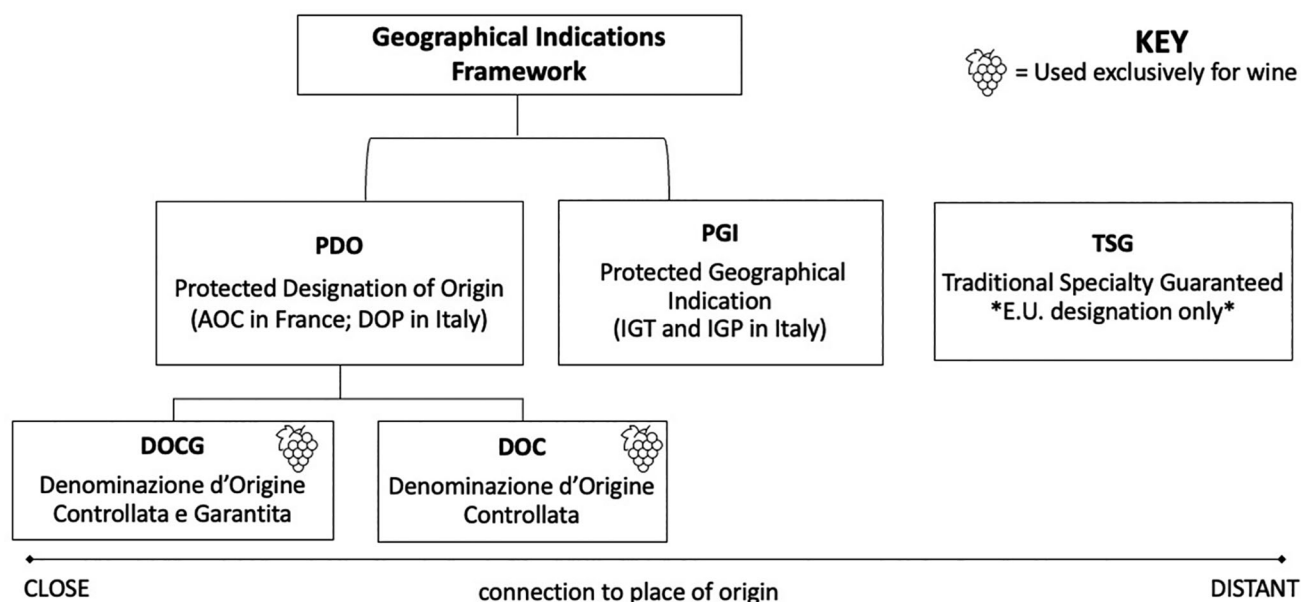


FIGURE 1: *Geographical Indications framework with Italian designations.*

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mythic landscapes. Today, the technical definition of the mark is a symbolic icon of quality: “A geographical indication is a sign used on products that have a specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation that are due to that origin” (World Intellectual Property Organization [WIPO] 2017: 6). Geographical Indications appear simple but are actually complex because they signify the unquantifiable stuff of economic life, elements such as physical boundaries, generational histories, and stringent product specifications.³ At the same time, regimes vary based on country and are also translated into EU regulations. Attributing authenticity to products across different geographies and communities is incredibly complex because the artisanal producers’ connection to place is rarely incontrovertible and often warrants justification. Today, many consumers believe that only the finest grapes can be found in French soils and climates. Never mind that any winemaker will tell you that every year the wine is different even with the same grape varieties and winemaking process. For the French Terroir Strategy to work, however, time, just as much as place, needs to remain constant.

By far the most influential treaty active today regarding the protection of place and production is the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) proposed by the World Trade Organization (WTO). TRIPS went into effect in 1995 to address the international protection of GIs within a WTO framework (Parasecoli 2017). It laid out two types of GIs: Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and

Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). PDOs are the most restrictive and only allow characteristics resulting solely from the terrain and abilities of producers in the region of production to qualify for this designation. A favorite example is champagne, which can come only from a designated area of France’s Champagne region. PGIs are less restrictive. To gain a PGI, there must be a characteristic or reputation associating the product with a given area, and at least one stage in the production process must be carried out in that area. This means raw materials used in production often come from elsewhere. An example of this is bresaola della Valtellina, a northern Italian cured meat made from beef. Producers making bresaola della Valtellina source raw beef from outside the region but cure the meat locally. In Italy, there is another distinction backed by the European Union but not outlined in TRIPS, called Traditional Specialty Guaranteed (TSG). This EU designation is the least restrictive and highlights the “traditional” methods used to make the food. An example of a TSG is Neapolitan pizza.

Today, there are approximately 65,900 protected GIs across the globe, and the majority of GIs indicate an origin from Europe. Only approximately .001 percent of GIs come from the continent of Africa (WIPO 2017, 2019: 182–183). Does this mean hardly any authentic craft goods or food products are worthy of a GI on the continent? Even writing the question feels ridiculous. But the question and the answer—a resounding no—lead us to ask: What do these indications do in the world? How is authenticity legally, politically, and

socially created? By whom? And to what end? In this special section, the authors focus on production — of salami, olive oil, cheese, and dried figs — to understand the people, places, and traditions considered as authentic to shed light on who is missing, what is left unsaid in this process, and what worlds are being generated.

All the authors in this section grapple with the concept of a taste of place, which creates new possibilities for the artisanal producer. And artisanal producers use many terms to describe what they do because each case is unique, even though the global regime of Geographical Indications would have consumers think otherwise. For the artisanal producers we meet in Jillian Cavanaugh's article, the emphasis is less about place and more about generations of family members participating in craft foods. This is summed up in the term *nostrano*, which we learn means “ours” and connotes pride in family business. We also see concepts change. As Cristina Grasseni shows in her article, *tipicità* once meant an unmediated relationship between the artisanal producer and her land, animals, and processing. In the wake of a global pandemic, *tipicità* becomes a way to support the artisanal producer. In her article, Amanda Hilton draws attention to the distinction between *qualità*, evaluated with training, and *genuino*, an unmediated passion for olive oil. Rather than the trained palate, something *genuino* invokes the social relationships that come from participating in markets and working with others. Hilton asks readers to “think more carefully about which characteristics we ascribe to foods, and with what motivations, justifications, and effects upon whom.” Characteristics come not only from the soil and the place, as Elizabeth Krause points out in her article, but the different microecologies within a territory, and the disciplined practices as well as improvisations of growing and curating figs.

In her study of US artisanal cheesemakers, Heather Paxson is quick to caution that “terroir, after all, is not a thing in the world to protect but an articulation of value that may or may not retain its currency” (Paxson 2012: 212). She shows that terroir allows for standardization in diversity, creating a commonality among cheesemakers. The term is, contrastingly, about the uniqueness of the landscape and the standardization of production sites. In this special section, this divergence is culturally productive. Like Paxson, we are interested in artisanal producers to see the ways in which they build their authentic processes. Terroir, that pesky “taste of place,” lurks in the background as the oldest framework for modern forms of institutionalized authenticity.

Producers' concerns with authenticity manifest in subtle and direct ways. Anthropologist Brad Weiss, working on heritage pork production in the United States, sees authenticity as

an “underlying preoccupation that . . . places these diverse practices within a common framework, but it is also an overt ideological commitment” (Weiss 2016). Weiss also shows that authenticity is not just an ideological commitment—it is also practice: the ways pigs are treated, for example. Weiss explains that “to be authentic requires connection” (2016: 248). Connection for Weiss is about “an unmediated transparency, a direct intersubjective encounter that is not subject to denotation precisely because it is unmarked. It is apparently unmediated and unadulterated” (2016: 249), very similar to Hilton's notion of *genuino*. Similarly, this connection is both economically valuable and material. According to Weiss, there is a realness at the center of this connection that is made through encounters with pigs, landscape, and farmers.

As many of these very same authors have shown, authenticity is not only about connections and inclusions but also disconnections and exclusions. Rajko Mušič convincingly argues that exclusion is a requirement of authenticity. Mušič explains that “any experience of authenticity is at the same time a building block of a social exclusion” (2012: 55). The authors in this special section also grapple with exclusion through authenticity. This attention makes exclusion relevant in who can participate in the “heritage arena” as demographics change, climates oscillate, and trade networks are impacted due to a pandemic (see this section's articles by Grasseni and Krause). Cavanaugh, in her article, presents the ethereal figure of the immigrant who speaks local dialect and has a great command of heritage foods. It is no surprise, really, that we never meet this character, because, as a symbol they are *doing* the cultural work necessary to draw boundaries for inclusion. Indeed, “[belief in] authenticity is a necessary condition of social differentiation between us and them” (Mušič 2012: 55). While we agree with this theorization, we expand authenticity beyond inclusion and exclusion to focus on the artisanal producer—the cheesemaker, the salami and olive oil producer, and the fig grower. As Krause explains, the “artisan is a useful category for producing and sustaining authenticity.” This empirical focus allows for a critical lens to explore the artisanal producer as both symbol and laborer. We explore how the artisanal producers' involvement and creative work is co-opted by capitalist markets, while also being upheld as an alternative symbol to large-scale production (Munro and O'Kane 2022).

Simultaneously, the small-scale artisanal producers we meet in this section are precarious in at least two ways. First, they are sandwiched between a dominant global, capitalist system and its unruly edges, which are comprised of durable kin modes of production and vulnerable neo-peasant modes with principles of relationality, solidarity, and reciprocity.

Second, these artisanal producers are precarious in how they come up against pests, family members, and changing lifestyles due to unpredictable climates and an enduring pandemic. Contradictions like these provide an avenue to understand “the experiences of precariousness and creativity at work” (Miller 2019: 78).

Toward Critical Food Studies of Authenticity

Authenticity is an everyday part of consumption in contemporary consumer society, and its influence expands beyond food to encompass travel, art, music, and experiences. This undefined, unclear concept makes it particularly interesting to the social scientist because it is as much creative as it is opaque, what Fillitz and Saris call “productive ambiguity” (Fillitz and Saris 2012a: 1). Authenticity is also the work of representation—of geography, cultures, and agricultural ways—that is economically and socially valuable. The required, consistent cultural work to uphold means authenticity lends itself to creativity. An unbroken link to the past must be invented through the work of people guiding political processes, crafting documented histories, marketing on social media, and packaging and labeling products. It is no surprise that many scholars in fields concerned with cultural and social issues are drawn to questions of authenticity because so many of these same disciplines have grappled with authentically representing culture.

In her essential work, *In Search of Authenticity* (1997), Regina Bendix reminds how the politics of authenticity undergird disciplines concerned with aspects of culture—from folklore and anthropology to ethnic and area studies. Building such disciplines hinged on assumptions of materials as untainted. “The canons of the cultural disciplines, such as literary and language studies, music, art history, and ethnology, thus originated with a strong commitment to understand, restore, and maintain the genuine” (Bendix 1997: 4). Bendix argues that the heart of many disciplines came from a desire to stake out disciplinary spaces in institutions based on claims to genuineness.

In the contemporary world, genuine and spurious converge in ever new ways. They mingle intimately and create troublesome situations and solutions. Attempts to untangle the convergences may seem futile. Scholars, critics, and producers are a long way from realizing what Bendix expressed as her purpose: to help remove authenticity “from the vocabulary of the emerging global script” (7). Even so, inquiries have rewarding yields. We find intersections in global regimes of authenticity as similar to the ubiquity of precarity. The authors in this section show that economic possibilities rely

on the vestiges of capitalist organization that reigned before them. Cavanaugh, drawing on Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, reminds that “precarity is a globally coordinated phenomenon” (Tsing 2015: 205) found in the spaces the capitalist means of production have left behind, such as the steel and textile mills—modern pasts of capitalist ruin that make space for economic possibilities. Much like previous capitalist forms, “these possibilities generate their own patterns of exclusion” (Cavanaugh). Histories of capitalist ruin haunt the artisanal producer, sustaining established forms of racial and gendered inequality. Recent pasts are left unsaid and rarely if ever highlighted; rather, these pasts are conceptualized as evolutionary offshoots, extinct creatures with no bearing on the present.

These pasts also influenced the development of anthropology. The study of culture was, for much of its history, embedded in a capitalist, colonial project obsessed with collecting. Museums were the centers, and anthropologists found and curated artifacts from remote bastions of authentic, disappearing cultures. Curating artifacts could tell a story, one that served to educate curious on-lookers as they deciphered pottery, baskets, and weapons. Prior to the passage of the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990, when many “authentic” collections began to be recast as unethical and returned to their rightful owners, the anthropologist’s authority to claim authenticity was left, for the most part, unquestioned. Similarly, the work of salvage ethnography was central to the anthropological enterprise. Projects of authenticity create their own politics of representation, similar to early anthropologists curating cultures in museums. Like Franz Boas removing European goods out of Kwakiutl long houses before taking a photograph (Fillitz and Saris 2012a: 6), authenticity is curation as much as it is an exercise in power. Occasionally, this curatorial work was also like necessary medicine, a cure ahead of its time, as Alice Walker suggests in the forward to Zora Neale Hurston’s posthumously published *Barracoon* (2018). The work receives much of its power through Hurston’s encounters with a survivor of the last slave cargo ship named Cudjo Lewis—a brilliant storyteller who could authentically represent the violence of racial capitalism.

It is only in the postcolonial period that questions about authority in representing “Others” come to the fore (see for example Clifford 1988).⁴ Similarly, we see lingering elements of colonialism, authority, and storytelling in the authenticity of food today. Ironically, we also see how authenticity narratives may underwrite promises of alternatives to capitalist-dominant practices. For example, how commodities like sugar can be taken up in new ways that nourish lives and

further an abolitionist politics, as Ashanté Reese has argued, improvising from her grandmother's tea cake recipe as an experiment in Black freedom (Reese 2020). Scholarly approaches to authenticity in the past twenty-five years have become not only more reflexive and critical but also more creative and generative. In this way we move to what Mušič explains as “the processes of authentication” and away from “merely analyzing authenticity” (2012: 47).⁵ We follow the work needed to create successful claims to authenticity—or better put, the stuff that sells (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014). Our emphasis on this work is part of a larger project⁶ that authenticity is not opposed to inauthenticity. Both may be built in the same process, and a surprising multiplicity of processes may also be possible.

History shows that colonial politics dictated what could be considered authentic. This takes a lot of cultural work. In Italy, the modern-day labor force must be erased, territories of production need to map neatly onto agricultural ways, written records need to be available, and on and on. All this work shows that authenticity isn't something one can find or discover. Rather than simply dismiss authenticity as a social construction, we follow Weiss (2016) who asserts that authenticity is an “ethnographically observable” phenomenon (2016: 4). Critiques of authenticity as disciplinary boundary construction, commodity fetishism, or invented tradition contribute minimally to understanding the durability, meaning, and political economy of authenticity in foodways. In *Real Pigs* (2016), Weiss offers a model grounded in connections to grasp parts of a totality involved in making, circulating, and consuming foods. His approach takes seriously the discourse and materiality of authenticity.

In Lauren Crossland-Marr's previous research with halal certifiers in Milan, Italy, the immersive ethnographic work revealed that innovation grounded in materiality raises concerns. Much like for artisanal producers of Italian foods, halal certifiers were concerned with food additives and genetically modified organisms (Crossland-Marr 2021). Halal certifiers do certify heritage foods, including meats and cheeses for Islamic markets abroad. Certifications on the global economic market operate in similar ways, be it halal, kosher or organic, in that these organizations create economic and social worlds beyond the place of production.

Special Section Themes


As we have touched on, all the authors in this special section tackle big questions in critical food studies, including forms of modern exclusion, definitions of authenticity, and

multispecies connections in craft production. Indeed, exclusion weighs heavily not only on those studying craft production, but also on those engaging in it. This leads the authors not to think of exclusion as a binary (exclusion/inclusion) but rather to focus on the historical and cultural contexts that lead to drawing boundaries between who can participate and when. Such boundaries do not just exclude immigrants but also work to exclude producers who do not have the social capital to be successful. Cavanaugh introduces us to two people both working in heritage salami in Bergamo. And she does something unique. She focuses on one producer who failed and one who succeeded. While both were “authentic” producers, their social capital and gendered expectations became what ultimately led to failure or success. In the same region, Grasseni is clear that immigrant labor is used frequently in making strachitunt cheese. Yet, those bodies do not fit into the narrative of “authentic” production. One of the producers Grasseni introduces us to considers herself a guardian not just of the cheese-making process but also of an embodied link to territory and culture. That's a tall order for anyone. In Krause's article, she is explicit (drawing on the work of Camilla Hawthorne [2021]), that Made in Italy fashion and food is embedded in nationalist fears meant to exclude and erase the contributions of immigrants.

In addition to a powerful contribution to inequality in heritage food systems, authors also engage with the importance of the nonhuman in building authenticity through production processes. In Grasseni's research, she terms this a “post-transhuman” anachronism—a concept that is useful when considering modernization in the development of authentic food products (Paxson 2012; Freidberg 2010). For Hilton, the flavors and smells of olive oil are deciding factors in attributing quality, not necessarily the producers themselves. In Krause's article, figs are at the center of a human passion, which is integral to sustaining co-evolutionary relationships in authentic production.

Indeed, as a human invention and institutional elaboration, authenticity is rarely agreed upon in both definition and in terms. All our authors grapple with local notions of authenticity, be it *qualità*, *tipicità*, *genuino*, *disciplinare*, or *nostrano*.⁷ Hilton shows that *qualità* refers to international standards, while *genuino* applies to the producer. Grasseni and Cavanaugh, both working in the same northern region of Italy, discuss the terms *nostrano* and *tipicità*. *Nostrano* “points to a group's shared experience and location, a process that both builds from long-standing historical groupings but also serves to cement them as meaningful categories” (Cavanaugh). And these “authentic” categories can affect the production process. In Krause's article we meet an artisanal

producer whose passion for figs is evident. We learn that while Slow Food, that bastion of tradition, encourages only one variety of figs, since the “disciplined” dried Carmignano fig can be made only from the Dottato variety, this inspired fig cultivator also turns those rules on their head and uses prohibition to inspire creativity, cultivating numerous other fig varieties for a range of purposes. As all the authors in this section show, once institutions get involved and scaling up occurs, ideological commitments to biodiversity, heritage, and small production become complicated, and sometimes even unsustainable.

The artisanal producer is also grappling with very real modern dilemmas: climate change in the form of unpredictable weather patterns, global epidemics like COVID-19, and geopolitical conflicts in Europe that continue to disrupt supply chains, labor, and exchange networks. Inflation, job insecurity, and the rising costs of energy exacerbate economic precarity, leading to political unrest around the globe, including in Italy, as seen in the outcome of the recent 2022 elections there. Yet, “authentic” productions continue to flourish as a concept, commanding high prices on domestic and international markets. The artisanal producer is at the center of this work, reconciling creativity with local as well as global market demands. 

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NOTES

1. We selected the term “artisanal producer” because in Italy the term artisan or “artigiano” has different meanings in different contexts. In Prato, Italian sweater makers / subcontractors are called artisans while fig growers are called producers. To remain somewhat true to terminology in Italy, we use the term “artisanal producer.”
2. Examples of GIs include Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI).

3. Specifications that dictate production standards are referred to as “disciplinare” in Italian.
4. The film *The Gods Must Be Crazy* poked fun at this attempt to capture “authentic” culture through ethnographic film.
5. Rajko Muršič was thinking with music, but we believe there are parallels to food.
6. For example, see Lindholm 2002; Fillitz and Saris 2012b.
7. Carole Counihan’s excellent research in Sardinia investigates territorio, which might also be considered another emic guise of authenticity (Counihan 2018).

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