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Producing Heritage: Politics, Patrimony, and Palatability in the Reinvention of Lowcountry Cuisine

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Abstract

This article explores the way heritage agrobiodiversity provides fertile terrain for staking new claims of locality, culinary regional identity, and deliciousness in the United States. To do so it considers the contemporary reinvention of an “authentic” southern cuisine in the Carolina Lowcountry. In this region, heritage grains—otherwise perceived to be bland or unremarkable—are being strategically positioned to serve as a vehicle for promoting a culinary and cultural distinctiveness rooted in biodiversity and Lowcountry cuisine is being built on discourses of heritage and taste. Focusing in depth on two instrumental actors in the region’s agricultural and culinary reinvention, it is suggested that, much like the concept of terroir, heirloom grains are being employed to leverage new values on the marketplace and construct new definitions of deliciousness. The reinvention process, however, is riddled with accentuations and erasures, emphasizing the “tasty” aspects while eliding unsavory others.

Keywords: taste, cultural politics, authenticity, heritage, identity, Lowcountry cuisine

Artisan mill-owner Glenn Roberts sent Dan Barber, the famed chef of Blue Hill at Stone Barns, a thousand-dollar check and a desiccated corncob. In an accompanying note, he conveyed a single encouragement: save and celebrate the heirloom seed. According to Roberts, the corn was a heritage varietal known as Eight Row Flint that dates back to the 1600s, originally hand-selected by Native Americans for its comparatively high yield and its exceptional flavor. By

the eighteenth century it was widely cultivated throughout the Hudson River Valley but was brought to the point of near extinction in the early 1800s. Fortunately, some of the corn had been transported to Italy where it survived, if marginally, under the name of *Otto File* to the present day. Roberts suggested that by propagating the corn Barber would be cultivating “an important and *threatened* historic flavor of Italy while simultaneously *repatriating* one of New England’s extinct foodways.” If that was not enough, the note continued, Eight Row Flint was “quite possibly the most *flavorful* polenta corn on the planet,” and “absolutely *unavailable* in the US” (Barber 2013, 1–3, emphasis added).

Glenn Roberts, a central protagonist in the analysis that follows, foregrounds here several key themes in the contemporary vitalization of heritage food: threat, nativity, exclusivity, and flavor. With his appeal to Barber, Roberts was proposing the reinvention of a regional cuisine built on a foundation of heirloom grains—a cuisine that would simultaneously celebrate heritage and taste as its primary values.¹ I suggest that the broader contemporary culinary and cultural valorization of heritage foods, and grains in particular, in terms of heritage and taste demands problematization. For though offered as natural, both are at once biological and thoroughly cultural concepts that work to naturalize, in the fullest meaning of the term, authenticity, identity, and culinary superiority.

Although heritage foods are genetically distinct from other hybrid and genetically modified varieties, the articulation of “heritage” to a comestible locates it in a broader social discourse informed by the politics of place and patrimony (cf. Jordan 2007). Likewise taste itself has innate and socially constructed aspects. Rozin (1998) suggests that culinary aversions and preferences are shaped by natural physiological systems but disgust and delight are also thoroughly cultural; they are learned dispositions caught up in complex boundary-making discourses that both establish hierarchies within groups and distinguish groups from one another (Bourdieu 1984; Douglas 1966). As just one example, Ohnuki-Tierney (1993) proposes that “nonsticky long-grain rice does not taste good to the Japanese, whereas it is the preferred rice in many other Asian countries” (13). Taste preferences differ, she emphasizes, because taste is always acquired and suspended in meaning and identity-making cultural processes.

Taste is not only culturally variable but context-dependent. As Mintz (1985) proposes, complex carbohydrates form the foundation of most human diets historically, but to compensate for their otherwise insipid nature they are almost universally supplemented with fringe flavors that make “the starch easier to swallow” and “ingestively more interesting” (11). Warman (2003) likewise suggests that “neutral-tasting” cornmeal dough, increasingly of central importance in certain African diets, is dipped in sauces “to help the paste go down and give it some flavor” (89). In addition to their relative blandness, staple grains are commonly the unmarked item in a culinary repertoire, essential but too quotidian to be noteworthy, which not incidentally also makes them excellent candidates for the essentializing claims of identity politics (Ohnuki-Tierney,

41). Culinary monotony, or novelty, has profound effects on the perception of a staple food's flavor and desirability. Numerous historians of Italian foodways have emphasized that *cucina povera* (peasant fare), characterized by the consumption of staple grains and particularly cornmeal polenta, has only recently come to be considered tasty emancipated from the context of dietary monotony and widespread poverty (see especially Scarpellini 2016; Dickie 2008; Diner 2001).

The critical task, then, is to tease out moments of naturalization in which culturally and historically relative dispositions (such as taste) are positioned as intrinsic and to ask what work culturally specific resources (such as heritage) are marshalled to achieve. To this end, in what follows I reflect on series of related questions. In an era of globalized modernity, marked generally by processes of cultural, culinary, and genetic homogenization, what are we to make of the renaissance of heritage foods?² In the case of heritage grains, how might we conceptualize the contemporary culinary valorization of a category of food—staple grains such as rice, wheat and cornmeal—widely perceived to be bland or otherwise uninteresting in the American culinary imaginary?³ And what might the current reinvention of heritage grains, discursively situated as the antithesis of tasteless industrial varieties and as Roberts suggests above possibly the “most flavorful grains on the planet,” tell us about the politics of place, patrimony, and palatability in the contemporary United States and more broadly?

Heirloom grains, like other heritage foods gaining popularity in the United States and elsewhere, owe much of their contemporary revival to their role in cultural politics. I argue that grains which for centuries were associated with tasteless, daily gruels have not radically changed in terms of inherent palatability but, rather, are actively being (re)produced *as tasty* in their cultural reproduction *as heritage*. Both taste and heritage are embedded in contemporary meaning-making and value-adding processes that serve particular economic and cultural ends, working to naturalize contemporary projects to revitalize “authentic” forms of food production and consumption that are far from apolitical. They are marshalled in projects to defend and celebrate “traditional” food culture and, like other forms of cultural politics, heritage grains are employed materially and discursively to cultivate affective attachments associated with tradition under the auspices of its physical or ideological attack. Much like the concept of *terroir* elaborated below, heirloom grains link people to places and work to reinforce claims of exceptionalism.

To highlight the way heritage agrobiodiversity provides fertile terrain for staking new claims of culinary superiority, market exceptionality, and regional identity in the United States, this article attends to the contemporary reinvention of an “authentic” southern cuisine in the Carolina Lowcountry. “Authenticity” is a culturally constructed concept that mobilizes past practices to legitimize and valorize present projects.⁴ My use of the term reinvention to describe the recent vitalization of Lowcountry cuisine draws on the “reinvention of food” framework put forward by Paxson and Grasseni (2014) as the



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contemporary phenomenon of “rediscovering and revaluing food as patrimony, as cultural heritage and as a catalyst of new forms of relationships and ways of life” (Grasseni 2012, 198). By observing the transformation of production and perception in the reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine, I show that heirloom grains are being strategically positioned by regional tastemakers to serve as a vehicle for promoting a culinary and cultural distinctiveness rooted in biodiversity and suggest that the prominent rhetorical appeals of its social construction are to heritage and taste.

This article focuses on two elite, white male tastemakers in the Lowcountry region’s agricultural and culinary reinvention: Glenn Roberts, founder of Anson Mills in Columbia, South Carolina, and Sean Brock, head chef and proprietor of two critically acclaimed restaurants, Husk and McCradys, in Charleston, South Carolina. Together, Roberts and Brock are making a concerted, strikingly collaborative, and very public effort to revitalize Lowcountry cuisine on a foundation of heritage-laden and flavor-driven heirloom grains. Their project of reinvention is noteworthy not only because “authentic” Lowcountry cuisine, insofar as they imagine it, has not existed since the early twentieth century but also because it represents a process of producing tastes, territories, and *terroirs* more commonly observed in Europe than in the United States. The politics of patrimony and palatability in the reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine is replete with accentuations and erasures, both crucial to (re)producing heritage grains in the contemporary culinary imaginary and to shifting perceptions of “good” taste and value.

This research is part of ongoing project to explore the relationship between market value and cultural values across the contemporary American foodscape. Ethnographic data were collected as part of a four-month, multi-sited investigation with nearly eighty artisan food producers throughout the United States in the summer of 2013. My analysis incorporates participant observation and semi-structured interviews with Roberts and a close-reading textual analysis of Brock’s acclaimed cookbook. In the section that follows, I begin by situating this case study within the broader literature related to the production of heritage food and foodways and the cultural politics of *terroir*.

***Terroir* Tastes and Heritage Foods**

The concept of *terroir* or *goût de terroir* (taste of place) usefully umbrellas much of what has been written about the politics of patrimony, place-making, and the palate. Although ostensibly linked “naturally” to material aspects of particular locales, such as soil, microclimate, and topography, and to cultural aspects such as techniques and know-how, *terroir* has become an important mechanism to leverage “naturalized” claims of uniqueness, scarcity, and gustatory superiority on the market—it is a selectively invented tradition that serves particular institutional interests (Guy 2003; cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). For instance, Trubek (2008) argues that in France, “*goût de terroir*” is “part of a national project to preserve and promote France’s much-vaulted agrarian past” (53). While the politics of patrimony and place buttress identity projects,

she argues so too do the politics of the palate; “The ‘production of locality’ *through taste* helps constitute the meaning of France in the midst of the global flow of ideas, ingredients, and values” (Trubek 2008, 53; emphasis added). Bowen and DeMaster (2014) likewise argue that appeals to *terroir*, taste, and heritage are “not simply an effort to nostalgically preserve specific aspects of the past, freezing them in time, but [are] a conscious, collective response to the standardizing and industrializing tendencies of globalization” (551). Barham (2003) proposes that *terroir* discourse is inherently tied to the concept of patrimony, a socially constructed “ongoing process of collective representation of the past through food” (132).

American producers, retailers, chefs, and other food systems practitioners are cultivating and capitalizing on the concept of *terroir* as well. In the case of Wisconsin artisanal cheese production, the elaboration of heritage and *terroir* is “both an emergent, ongoing process of adapting to changing market, cultural, and geographic conditions and an effort to recover valued traditions and practices and (re)connect to specific places” (Bowen and de Master 2014, 559). Furthermore, Paxson (2010) suggests that American artisan cheesemakers are “reverse-engineering” *terroir* cheeses “suitable to the nature-culture of U.S. agricultural and culinary landscapes” (444). Her analysis of American *terroir* suggests that if the concept is to be successfully adapted to the American context it must appeal to alternative claims than “the supposed authenticity of regionally broad food traditions [that] may reach back centuries” as in Europe and elsewhere (Paxson 2010, 446). Although the reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine offers a partial challenge to this claim, Paxson (2013) persuasively argues that artisan producers are “drawing freshly meaningful lines of connection among people, culture, and landscape, by investing rural places anew with affective significance and material relevance” (201–202).

Despite (or perhaps because of) the intimate link between patrimony and place in public discourse, much of the *terroir* literature references cultural heritage but offers little critical analysis of it. Cultural heritage, “a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past,” is not something found or reclaimed unsullied, but neither is it invented out of whole cloth (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998).⁵ As a form of cultural heritage, heritage cuisine “binds individuals across time and space through discourses of patrimony” that accentuate “its ritualized production and consumption, and tie to the unique milieu in which it is found” (Di Giovine 2014, 78). Like *terroir*, “heritage [food or otherwise] is less an identifiable thing than a constructed discourse strategically deployed for political, economic, or ideological goals” (Di Giovine 2014, 1). In the marketing of cultural heritage, as Grasseni (2014) argues, “local foodstuffs and recipes are increasingly rediscovered and patrimonialized through quasi-ethnic forms of food revivals” (25). Indeed, as cultural heritage theorist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) suggests, heritage always adds value; the heritage industry is at its heart a value-adding industry (see also Di Giovine 2009). Although analyses of the role of specific heritage foods in food systems revitalization are, to date, limited, as Weiss (2014) and De St. Maurice



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(2014, see also this issue) propose—in the case of pastured pork in North Carolina and heirloom vegetables in Japan, respectively—attempts to define and distinguish heritage foods work to cultivate an interest in local histories, culinary discernment, and social connection; a process in which elite chefs play a key part.

To better understand the role heritage grains play in the politics of patrimony, place, and the palate in the Carolina Lowcountry, Paxson and Grasseni's "reinvention of food" framework provides a key analytic, offering reinvention "as 'rediscovery,' as the revival of dishes and culinary techniques from generations past" and also "as 'renewing the foundation of,' or shoring up familiar methods and modes of food production so that they remain viable under new political, regulatory, and market regimes" (2014, 1; emphases added). Here I draw on the notion of "reinvention" to consider the ways in which the food and foodways of the Carolina Lowcountry are both a rediscovery (of traditional grains, flavors, and meanings) and a renewing of the foundation (of culinary exceptionality, value, and local agriculture). The reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine is, however, also a strategic forgetting of the less appetizing parts of certain foods' past—the slavery of rice production, the monotony of grain consumption, the pellagra associated with corn meal in the American South. One way to make bland grains palatable is to mask them with flavorful ingredients that would have been scarce or unavailable historically. Another way is to ignore their "historical bitterness" altogether, accentuating tasty aspects while eliding unsavory others. To better contextualize and problematize the contemporary restoration of Lowcountry cuisine, and its basis in gastropolitics, a brief overview of its emergence and decay follows.

The Life and Death of Lowcountry Cuisine

The Lowcountry region of the United States designates the tidewater Atlantic coastal areas of much of South Carolina, Georgia, and the northernmost part of Florida. The borders of the Lowcountry generally include the proximate Sea Islands and extend inland roughly eighty miles with Charleston, SC reigning as the region's cultural and economic capital. By the late eighteenth century the Lowcountry had already emerged as both geographically and culturally distinct, characterized by an "imaginative geography" of plantation agriculture and genteel southern aristocracy as well as less sanguine ideological depictions of backwaters and backwardness (McCurry 1997, 37–40). The historic agricultural products and culinary practices typical of this region designate what is known as Lowcountry cuisine. In the colonial era, the marshy maritime geography of the coast lent itself to rice cultivation and the practices of slave-based plantation agriculture reinforced its success; alongside cotton and indigo, rice became arguably the most important component of the region's thriving export economy. Rice also became the foundation grain of Lowcountry foodways, a prominence celebrated in the alternative moniker for the cuisine—the Carolina Rice Kitchen (Hess 1992).

The cuisine of the Lowcountry arose from a distinct set of historical circumstances and a convergence of English, French Huguenot, West African, and Native American foodways. It incorporated significant elements of West African cuisine: ingredients and preparations brought over with enslaved peoples in their forced diaspora to the Americas (Carney 2009). Traditional Lowcountry cuisine was founded on rice but several other staple ingredients marked it as unique, including other grains such as cornmeal grits but also fresh seafood, benne, sweet potatoes, squash, kale and collard greens, field peas, peanuts, okra, watermelon, and sorghum (Taylor 2012). The dishes most directly associated with the cuisine in the contemporary public imagination—shrimp and grits, she-crab soup, and the rice and field pea dish known colloquially as hop-pin’ John—are expressive of the region’s hybrid history as a melting pot of culinary cultures and locally inflected ingredients.

Critically in regard to the politics of authenticity in the reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine, many of the primary cultivars listed above only became fixtures in Lowcountry landscapes in the second quarter of the nineteenth century (Shields 2015). The adoption of crop rotation practices and cultivar diversification, coupled with new crop varieties developed in what Shields calls “the age of experiment,” combined to offer a distinct set of ingredients that form the basis of the Carolina Rice Kitchen as it is imagined, and being reimaged, today. The Lowcountry cuisine that proliferated in this era did not truly reach its apogee until the post-bellum decades of Reconstruction (Shields 2015, 7–13). Denaturalizing agricultural products and culinary practices that emerged at a particular historical moment, Shields (perhaps unintentionally) renders claims of “authenticity” suspect in highlighting precise points of invention and revealing the constructed nature—in the fullest meaning of the term—of appeals to biodiversity with an arbitrary baseline.

By the first decades of the twentieth century, many of the cuisine’s primary cultivars were no longer in commercial production (Shields 2015). Carolina Gold rice, a regionally prominent landrace varietal, was something of a canary in the coal mine for the fate of the region’s foodways more broadly. Although rice was the central component of the southern coastal table, the last commercial plantation in South Carolina ceased cultivating rice in 1911 (Stewart 1991). The significant transformations of the agricultural economy and culinary culture in the early twentieth century affected not only rice but nearly all the other prominent cultivars as well. The changes had been so significant that, by 1986, all that remained of Lowcountry cooking in Charleston’s public sphere was “a mere handful of restaurants ... [serving] pasty versions of she-crab soup. Several self-described soul food houses served fried fish and red rice, but that was about it” (Taylor 2012, ix). While Lowcountry foodways continued to be of vital importance in the domestic sphere, with imported varieties and the fruits of subsistence gardens substituting for broader regional production, even vernacular culinary repertoires were rendered increasingly marginal as key ingredients became scarce or nonexistent (Shields 2015).



While Lowcountry cuisine was in a poor state for much of the twentieth century, with fewer and fewer restaurants preparing traditional dishes and essentially no commercial production of distinctive local ingredients, by the turn of the new millennium its “authentic” material aspects were in the process of restoration. In 2005, as the founding president of the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation, farmer and grist mill owner Glenn Roberts secured seeds from a USDA seedbank and brought the famed Carolina Gold rice back into commercial cultivation. Roberts, in concert with a network of scientists, farmers, and cultural historians, has restored several dozen heirloom grains to commercial production over the past decade. On the foundation of these grains, Lowcountry cuisine has begun its material, cultural, and culinary reinvention.

Glenn Roberts: Producing Patrimony

I first met Glenn Roberts in the summer of 2013 at his granary and grist mill in Columbia, South Carolina. Housed in an inconspicuous building, tucked behind a derelict carwash near the city’s center, Robert’s company Anson Mills cares little about exterior aesthetics; he tells me, “it’s an investment in wheat and people.” It is also an investment in a vision to reinvent a diverse agricultural economy centered on heritage grain. Since 1998, Anson Mills has been a pioneer in growing, contracting, and milling a multitude of nearly extinct varieties of heirloom corn, rice, and wheat. Most of these uncommon heritage varieties, like Carolina Gold rice or Bloody Butcher corn, were thought to be lost forever. Roberts has made it his mission to recover and restore these remaining heritage grains and has spent the last two decades reseeding the agrarian landscape and restocking the restaurant larders of a significant portion of the American South.

Roberts seems at first an odd protagonist in the revival of heirloom grains; he is neither a chef nor a farmer. Before founding Anson Mills, Roberts spent two decades as a historic architecture consultant. To commemorate building openings, Roberts was often asked to provide a historically accurate menu from those bygone eras, something he quickly realized was an impossible task—the necessary ingredients of the Lowcountry cuisine were no longer commercially available. “I vowed I would find or restore the quality ingredients of the Carolina Rice Kitchen and make them available,” he recalls (Rentschler 2004). Not unlike restoring historic buildings, heirloom grains have become a vehicle for Roberts to (re)construct a particular image of the Antebellum South and revitalize a heritage that, by his reckoning, is centered on traditional agriculture and authentic culinary culture.

For Roberts, heirloom grains are not only a common heritage but also a very personal one. His mother was born and raised in depression-era coastal Carolina eating what was, at that time, fairly standard Geechee fare (alternatively known as the Carolina Rice Kitchen). Rice was arguably the most important ingredient for the regional cooking practices of the early American south, and certainly critical for Robert’s own heritage. He reflects:

I'm a rice guy, I was raised with rice. I got into this [Anson Mills] because we didn't have local rice anymore in the Carolinas. My mom never liked the rice, didn't like boxed rice. Said it smells and tastes like vitamins, I'm not even going to cook it. She grew up on the coast here and they hand-pounded their daily rice in the back yard. For grits, you had a little corn patch in the back of your house and you took that corn every week down to the mercantile mill and ground grits and cornmeal fresh. Those ideas of fresh, new crop, landrace or heirloom, preindustrial crops, all disappeared after the depression here. My mother was never happy again foodwise.

As his (almost Proustian) recollections reveal, Roberts is motivated to restore heirloom grain production, in part because it evokes a familial patrimony passed down from mother to son. Roberts conjures a nostalgically romantic image of a pre-industrial era replete with the freshest, most flavorful ingredients; a cuisine and traditional way of life that is expressive of regional foodways and rich in cultural meaning. While it is important to attend to the tension between the domestic consumption of Geechee fare and Roberts' website description of his mother as an "erstwhile southern belle," key here is that the "heritage" of heritage grains registers on both public and very personal scales.

Though high-profile chefs countrywide have taken a keen interest in the company's heirloom grains, Roberts emphasizes that "Anson Mills exists for seeds. We're not here really to produce food for chefs. That's a third tier derivative of working with seed." Some of the repatriated seeds (i.e. Carolina Gold rice) have come from governmental or non-profit seed banks. Many others have come from *in situ* horticultural conservation on the economic and geographic margins. Roberts explains, "We're recovering seed that's lost ... [farmers] send us family corn, single-family, hand-selected." With the exception of rice, on-farm heirloom conservation cannot be understood without recognizing that, historically, these grains were preserved specifically for cottage-industry distilled spirit production, and many heritage varieties have been continuously cultivated since the antebellum era. Roberts emphasizes that they have been selectively bred for generations to accentuate flavor:

You save it because it's tasty. Distillers want to distill flavors if they really care about what they're doing, so their family corn is really tasty. That was politics, booze, food, all in one. Farmers and millers got together and figured out what is the best grain for hooch, and their hooch was phenomenal. That grain also makes the best grits and cornmeal.

In addition to yield and market demand, Roberts suggests that flavor was the preeminent quality farmers selected for when they bred and saved heirloom seeds. This assertion may well be read as a presentist introduction of contemporary ideas and perspectives into depictions of the past and a back-projection of the preeminence of taste in a complex historical context. While it may be based in truth, the discourse works to elevate and certify the taste of



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contemporary cuisine vis-à-vis the always nuanced articulation of power and knowledge.

While it was initially a challenge for Roberts to recover these forgotten varietals, now “[Farmers] send it automatically ... [they] send it to us when their kids aren’t going to carry on and they know it’s not going to be replanted.” Aimed at reversing the erosion of smallholder agriculture across the rural south, Roberts encourages current farmers to continue cultivation and new farmers to pick up the spade by guaranteeing a grain market and a worthwhile return on investment. The number of growers has blossomed over the last decade, which Roberts attributes to an expanding recognition of the values reproduced by the alternative food production system.

You have to step back away from yield, and stop thinking in a profit finance model, even though you can make a profit from it. You have to step away from that and say, people lived doing this for thousands of years and they weren’t worried about yields ... they were worried about flavor.

Taste, it should be underlined, is thus situated as the key characteristic of not only historical crop selection but also the contemporary discursive valorization of heritage grains. The radically different context of their production and consumption through time alters the perceived “goodness” of heirloom grains, both in terms of what is perceived as palatable and what is considered to be valuable.

Roberts accentuates taste not only in the production of more flavorful grain varietals, but in an artisanal milling process that preserves the organoleptic qualities of the cereal. Inside the “factory” are a series of repurposed appliances and seemingly anachronistic technologies. Recovered bootlegger mills, with thin stones applying gentle pressure and run at slow speeds, replicate river-powered versions. “This is exactly what you would be producing if you were doing it right and doing it slow,” he notes, “if you cranked it up 10 times faster, which we could, there’d be no flavor whatsoever. And you’d be altering the oils too. If you move any oxygen through flour at all you ruin the flavor. You kill the flour.” Roberts’s attention to flavor and craft production is set in especially sharp relief when contrasted with the industrial model of fully mechanized grain processing that runs at high temperatures and, proposed in no uncertain terms, “kill[s] the flour.” Combine these insensitive technologies with grains that have been bred primarily for other qualities than flavor and the result is, for Roberts, an insipid product that left his mother “never happy again foodwise.” Roberts directly criticizes grain breeding regimes and the dominant political ecology of wheat that has only exaggerated since the second half of the twentieth century (Busch et al. 1991). He offers his heritage grain as the morally and gustatorily superior alternative.

The focus on flavor is, importantly, not (only) a charity to otherwise impoverished palates but (also) an effort to create an extra-ordinary product attractive to restaurant chefs. As the “third tier derivative of working with seed,” Roberts

recognized from the outset that for the model to work financially he would need to appeal to the flavor-tuned palates of high-profile chefs. “It was very simple in my mind ... that chefs would be able to pay extraordinary amounts per pound, like ten times market even, for products if they were extraordinary in flavor. I targeted chefs [from the beginning].” Here the submerged but ever present relationship between producing tastes and producing capital comes prominently to the fore, complicating the otherwise too tidy assertions that heirloom grains are inherently more delicious and that their restoration is solely heritage driven, without vested institutional and economic interests.

Though he is in the business of cultivating and selling grain, Roberts underlines that the food and cuisine has to come first. As the Anson Mills website reads:

We hope to restart the Carolina Rice Kitchen cuisine itself—a cuisine that depends on a complex agricultural system suited to local conditions and cultural needs. Agriculturists of the period [nineteenth century] sought to impose the maximal beneficial effect of *terroir* on their ingredients. By doing these things as well, Anson Mills will continue to reintroduce the diverse and flavorful foodways of the Carolina Rice Kitchen. (Anson Mills 2015)

Like the original cultivators of heritage grains, we are told, he too hopes to accentuate the “native” *terroir* of the Carolinas by renewing the foundation of a system of food production “suited to local conditions and cultural needs” and rediscovering the region’s flavorful foodways. In doing so his emphasis on deliciousness elides the bitter tastes of scarcity, slavery, sharecropping, and poverty. Nevertheless, in bringing heirloom grains back into commercial production under the aegis of inherent flavor, Roberts has provided a vital platform upon which these same taste-driven chefs are attempting to erect a delicious, living memorial to “authentic” Lowcountry cuisine. Although the historical “authenticity” of the cuisine is certainly up for debate, as are all such claims, contemporary Lowcountry cuisine is being naturalized through appeals to heritage grains. These same grains are being employed by chefs like Sean Brock as a point of market leverage, gustatory exceptionality, and regional distinctiveness.

Sean Brock: Cooking (Up) Heritage

Motivated by a desire to reinvent the region’s historic foodways and reclaim an aspect of his own culinary heritage, Glenn Roberts is making heirloom grain available to an extent not seen since the first decades of the twentieth century. But the task of reinventing cuisine is incomplete without restaurant chefs and home cooks actually preparing food. In Charleston, South Carolina, chef Sean Brock has been one of the chief actors in reinventing Lowcountry cuisine and the culinary world has taken notice. His restaurant Husk was named “Best New Restaurant in America” by *Bon Appetit* magazine in 2011. His cookbook *Heritage* (2014) is a *New York Times* bestseller and winner of the 2015 James Beard Foundation Book Award for “American Cooking.” Celebrity chef Anthony



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Bourdain notes on the book's back cover that "Sean Brock is one of the most important chefs in America. In looking back at the roots of our cuisine, while always looking forward, he's changing the face of American food in a wonderful way." In looking back to look forward, we are told, Brock is reinventing Lowcountry cuisine in a "wonderful way," taking it from a largely forgotten culinary tradition to a delicious and definitive regional foodway of national prominence.

We can learn a good deal about the reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine from a close reading of Brock's acclaimed cookbook. Contemporary cookbooks offer revealing insights into not only the mores and motivations of chef authors but also the discursive strategies evoked by these elite tastemakers to shape the public palate and culinary imaginary. As an "effort on the part of some variety of specialist to standardize the regime of the kitchen, to transmit culinary lore, and to publicize particular traditions guiding the journey of food from marketplace to kitchen to table" (Appadurai 1988, 3) cookbooks produce and reproduce the boundaries of particular cuisines, reinforcing what their authors determine makes good food "good," such as taste, aesthetics, and ethics.

Brock's cookbook *Heritage* capitalizes on the growing cultural prominence of elite chefs and strategically employs the discursive power of the cookbook genre. It invites the reader into the restaurant kitchen to learn to prepare award-winning Lowcountry recipes while at the same time it works to codify the very meaning of the term. Before even breaching the cover, the reader is greeted with the chef's outstretched tattooed arms, one adorned with a colorful garden collage, the other a homage to his childhood home Virginia. The chef's hands offer a veritable bounty of multicolored beans directing our attention to the book's suggestive title, *Heritage*. Brock's culinary ethos is thus inscribed on his body and displayed in vibrant, evocative imagery—a respect for culinary roots, a reverence for heirloom biodiversity, and a veneration of individual and shared heritage.

Like Roberts, Brock discursively appeals to the concept of heritage in two respects: a romanticized paean to his own youth and a culinary tradition that dates back to the antebellum era. Throughout the pages—in tangential vignettes and recipe introductions—the reader becomes intimately familiar with Brock's personal history, how he learned, and learned to love, to cook. Brock recalls, "You'll read more about my grandmother in the pages of this book, because she's been the greatest influence in my life. When I was a kid, we ate three meals a day at home. I thought that's what everyone else in America did too ... you cooked what you grew, and you always knew where your food came from. That mentality influences everything I cook today..." (14). The similarity between this familial anecdote and the one offered by Roberts above is striking, but what demands emphasis is the rhetorical appeal to his grandmother that offers an old-timey authenticity to the chef's contemporary culinary endeavor. Moreover, it adds an affective component to his cuisine. To prepare a recipe at home or to dine in one of Brock's restaurants is now to sentimentally share the table with him (and his grandmother) and to connect in ways no recipe or dining experience could do alone. Here, as in other artisan economies (see Leitch

2003 and Paxson 2013), sentiment and tradition are commodified and nostalgia becomes a central value marketed and sold. What is more, in positioning the restaurant as a new bastion for the transmission of traditional knowledge and values, Brock situates it as a key site of adapting to changes in social life and of respecting more “authentic” modes of social reproduction.

The second aspect of heritage to which the chef appeals is that of the historic regional foodways of Lowcountry cuisine itself. Consider this evocative passage:

The Lowcountry is a diverse region filled with a heritage of deeply rooted traditions. It is a landscape of extraordinary beauty. The foodways here are old and elemental but speak with the authority of a hard fought past. The people in Charleston deeply appreciate their heritage foods made with local ingredients, and they respect the people who still cook them. The ingredients come from people who revere them, and the methods are sacrosanct as the ingredients. This food represents the living history of the Lowcountry, and I have always wanted to do my best to honor that. (Brock 2014, 14)

Brock places deliberate emphasis on “heritage”, “deeply rooted traditions”, and “old and elemental” foodways. While he makes the claim for an authority rooted in the past, he is also quick to remind us that it is a “living history,” alive and well, and able to be consumed in the form of his “authentic” food. Brock also works to construct an idealized vision of place, the Lowcountry itself, symbolized by its capital city Charleston. In the Lowcountry, Brock urges us to believe, (all) people revere and appreciate heritage foods; it is part of a patrimony they are proud of, and it is a way of relating and connecting to food to which one should aspire. His claim is descriptive but also prescriptive, working to disseminate a value paradigm contingent on culture and class.

While culinary heritage is partly ideological, it is also partly material. In this paragraph as well as throughout the book, there is an agro-ecological anchor through which Lowcountry cuisine is being moored. The taste of place offered by Brock is one rooted not only in culinary practices but in specific heirloom ingredients. On the one hand, heritage grains are unique to the *terroir* from which they derive; on the other, they are a fertile socio-biological grounds for staking a claim to authenticity and legitimacy as well as, by extension, exceptional value. Agrobiodiversity, in the form of Carolina Gold rice, Sea Island red peas, or John Haulk Yellow Dent corn, is in Brock’s rendering an essential and essentialized ingredient in the genuine Lowcountry hoppin’ John or bowl of grits.

Of course, as we know from Roberts’s project, all this “deeply rooted” authenticity centered on heritage grains is not even two decades old. Brock does not shy away from admitting this shallow history. In fact, he turns to it as an additional value. Elaborating on the hoppin’ John, a quintessential Lowcountry preparation of rice and beans, he notes:



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It wasn't until I tasted those Sea Island red peas in a bowl together with Carolina Gold rice that I realized what had gone wrong those many years ago when I'd first tasted hoppin' John. That hoppin' John was made with commercial, enriched rice and old, flavorless black-eyed peas. At that time the heirloom products that had helped shape the culture of Charleston weren't available for a chef to purchase. They simply weren't being grown. (Brock 2014, 15)

Brock pointedly contrasts industrial beans and rice with heritage varieties; on the one hand, "the blandest thing I had ever tasted," on the other, a truly "marvelous dish" with "the most flavorful rice" (15).

Chef Brock suggests that "in many places across the country, our [culinary] heritage is threatened ... over the last few decades, a transition to large-scale commercial agriculture has occurred, one that values disease resistance and plant yield over flavor and timeworn tradition" (27). To rectify this, his cuisine has two strategic aims, "to help bring the small local farmer back to prominence by respecting the work of local growers" and "to encourage farmers to reach back beyond the hybrid varieties ... that have transformed agriculture (and the taste of food) over the last century." We must reach back to heritage grains, he argues, because "only by reclaiming the flavors unique to Charleston ... can we begin to move forward. Otherwise no one will even know what's missing." What's missing for chef Brock, as for Roberts, is the ostensibly inherent superiority of heirloom grains that are respectful of culinary heritage and full of exceptional flavor. The reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine is thus discursively tethered to a rediscovery of the wonderful flavors of authentic heirloom grains; paradoxically less than two decades old and yet ancient enough to represent a "heritage of deeply rooted traditions."

In this reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine, however, it must be emphasized that the past and how it tasted are both being selectively imagined. The "authority of a hard fought past" Brock alluded to above includes a complex, and at times fraught, cultural relationship with the lingering specter of slavery and racial marginalization in the identity of the region. Indeed, the lowly hoppin' John itself is a hybrid of originally West African cultivars, historically produced and consumed primarily by enslaved African Americans, and the exploited production and sale of its core ingredients bankrolled the vast wealth of the city of Charleston (Shields 2015). While Brock does occasionally reference the fraught origins of Lowcountry cuisine, the historical amnesia and the cultural politics required to elevate what was once a slave-produced subsistence dish to gentrified James Beard award-worthy fare must inform any adequate understanding of its reinvention (cf. Van Van Sant 2015).⁶ The communities that are cultivated around particular foodways, both past and present, always include accentuations and elisions. The elevation of poverty foods, like hoppin' John or cornmeal grits (or say, its Italian counterpart, polenta) to symbols of elite taste and "bourgeois piggery" (Johnston 2007) omits not only the otherwise unsavory aspects of Lowcountry cuisine's foundation in slavery but also the

reality that grain-based diets not only fell out of fashion but may have been intentionally forgotten in the process of overcoming the bitter taste of scarce harvests and culinary monotony. What is more, reinventing vernacular foodways through the medium of elite chefs—in a manner that adds cultural but also monetary value—may bring critical acclaim to regional tastemakers but it is also linked to issues of social justice. Inflated prices exclude the very same, often marginalized, people that have long been the stewards of the ingredients and the cuisine. Lowcountry cuisine, in this respect, speaks less to an authority of a hard-fought past and more to the discursively constructed authority of a hard-fought present—of what counts as an authentic cuisine and who gets to decide and profit from it.

The Politics of Patrimony and the Palate

The examples of Glenn Roberts and Sean Brock offered here highlight a concerted and strikingly coordinated effort to reinvent Lowcountry cuisine on a foundation of heritage-laden and flavor-driven heirloom grains. Their restoration efforts are unique in that they evoke a form of origin-labelling without a label, proposing that the heritage aspect of grains themselves convey a delicious and distinctive *terroir* almost by default. But, as we have seen, that naturalization process takes a good deal of discursive work, implicated in a fraught form of cultural politics through which actors stake claims to exceptionality, exclusivity, and alterity.

Roberts and Brock's efforts resemble the place-making politics described by Barham (2007) "as the conscious use, construction, and reconstruction of social, historic, cultural, and ecological elements native to a particular location ... [used to] simultaneously preserve desirable aspects of a place and to enhance the economic viability of its inhabitants" (279). Roberts and Brock's construction and reconstruction or, in other words, reinvention of "native" elements provides a platform for claims of culinary exceptionality unique to Lowcountry cuisine. The economic viability they seek is engendered by claims of uniqueness, not just through the material production of high-quality products or the revitalization of a *terroir*-rich agrarian landscape, but through the discursive production of heritage and taste. What is more, they are fundamentally interested in not just *preserving* desirable aspects of place, but in actively *restoring* them.

In their restoration efforts, the reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine adds another layer of complexity to the ongoing debate about approaches to vitalizing regionally "authentic" food and foodways. Whereas West (2014) shows that the "living tradition" of cheesemakers in rural France contributes to keeping the region socially and economically viable and Aistara (2014) suggests that the regional identity of rural Latvia is vitalized through the rural culinary entrepreneurs who continue to live and work there, Bowen and de Master (2011) reveal how these efforts to energize rural foodways run the risk of creating a "museum of production." The efforts of Roberts and Brock to recreate an "authentic" cuisine in the American South on a bedrock of heritage grains



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produce a living tradition—living in respect to being biologically alive, in culinary demand, and culturally meaningful—though one that arguably did not exist a mere fifteen years ago. Their efforts also highlight that exploring the accentuation of good tastes and the elision of bad tastes is a vital aspect of understanding processes of culinary and cultural reinvention. Unlike place-making efforts in Europe and elsewhere, Lowcountry cuisine represents not only conservation but also restoration (and forgetting); a reinvention of foodways and flavors that are, curiously, nostalgic but beyond living memory. Roberts and Brock are not providing life support for a cuisine and countryside in decay, they are largely reviving (and thoroughly reinventing) it post-mortem. The uses (and abuses) of heritage grains are a powerful form of strategic naturalization that buttresses regional cultures and regional cuisines. In this way, Roberts and Brock aim to reinvent a living culinary history with very real potential to revitalize struggling rural economies, improve ecological sustainability, preserve agro-biodiversity, and sate desires for deliciousness. All of it is cultivated, they would suggest, alongside the production of “good” food.

But what makes good food “good” is never intrinsically so (cf. Jones 2015; Paxson 2013). And neither are the potential benefits of the reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine unalloyed. Its social construction and imagined past are selectively envisioned, strategically emphasizing the “tasty” aspects while eliding unsavory others. Moreover, in catering to wealthy consumers through the medium of elite chefs, consuming delicious Lowcountry heritage increasingly becomes a niche opportunity for the affluent and ostensibly enlightened (cf. Guthman 2008). What is more, I would suggest that heirloom grains risk co-optation by the very institutional interests their production is, at least partially, meant to contest. The counter-hegemonic aspects of heritage grains—like counter-cuisine, a threat to dominant agro-industrial regimes (Belasco 2006)—are vulnerable to the corporate biopiracy of landrace varieties explored elsewhere (Escobar 1998). Moreover, from the vantage of the Cherokee, Sea Island Geechee, or regional subsistence gardeners, all of whom have cultivated heirloom biodiversity historically as a commons, Roberts and Brock are already complicit in it. The institutional entanglements silently buttressing the reinvention of Lowcountry cuisine, in addition to the very real economic and ecological benefits this sort of place-making model supports, suggest that further study of its social and material construction is important and intellectually fertile. Contributing to ongoing academic engagement with the localization of food production, the politics of patrimony and the palate, and “the reinvention of food,” analysis of the production and consumption of heritage in the form of heirloom grains has never been more salient. If we are to agree with Roberts and Brock, it has also never been more savory.

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Notes

1. Heirloom grains, otherwise known as heritage or landrace, are cereal varieties that have been farmer-selected for particular qualities (yield, taste, nutrition, etc.) over the course of several generations and are adapted to particular geographic locales and culinary cultures.
2. Since the depression era over ninety percent of landrace varieties are either no longer cultivated or have become extinct entirely (Fowler and Mooney 1990). However, in the last quarter century “more than fifteen thousand heritage foods have returned to the U.S. foodscape” (Nabhan 2013, 8).
3. Certainly many grain-based foods—such as bread, biscuits, corn puddings, etc.—are far from tasteless. In the Lowcountry, however, it is the grains themselves, not their prepared form, that are being reconceptualized as tasty. Moreover, I emphasize that taste itself is simultaneously persistent and mutable, that nostalgia for bygone flavors is quite genuine but that the consumption context is critical. As is the case with other forms of *cucina povera* dietary monotony can render the most delicious foods dull. Extracted from their historic culinary context and re-embedded as haute cuisine, I suggest that heritage grains are suspended in a cultural and culinary politics of accentuation and erasure.
4. A full discussion of the fraught notion of authenticity is beyond the scope of this article. I use scare quotes throughout to signal the complex, contested nature of this term. For more on the topic see Regina Bendix (1997), and, specifically in relation to foodways, Long (2004).
5. A thorough review of the extensive body of literature on cultural heritage is beyond this article’s scope. For more in-depth discussion see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), Smith (2006), and Harrison (2013).



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6. The tastemakers of Lowcountry cuisine recently sparred in a well-publicized rhetorical battle in which African American food writer Michael Twitty accused elite Charleston chefs, including Brock, of cultural appropriation and of refusing to acknowledge their debt to the Geechee culinary tradition (see Dixler 2016 and Haire 2016).

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