

**Food, Drink and Identity:
Cooking, Eating and
Drinking in Europe
Since the Middle Ages**

Peter Scholliers

Berg

Food, Drink and Identity

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Cooking, Eating and Drinking in Europe Since the Middle Ages

**Edited by
Peter Scholliers**



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Foreword

The idea of this book emerged during the bi-annual colloquium of the *International Committee of Research into European Food History*, Aberdeen 1997, where the participants frequently savoured salmon and visited an old whisky distillery, allegedly two culinary signs of Scottishness. Would food and drink have served as identity markers in other places and times too? Ten food researchers, with widely varying interests and traditions, tackle this question enthusiastically by writing original chapters for this book, which leads the reader from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries, and from Norway to Spain.

This book exists because of the efforts of many people. First, I wish to thank the authors who dealt obstinately with many comments and suggestions, made by both the editor and an anonymous referee. Second, I wish to thank the anonymous referee for the attentive and critical reading of the manuscript, which proved to be very useful. Third, Frank Winter corrected the English of the non-native speakers: it is an enjoyable experience to work with someone who does much more than merely correcting texts. Finally, I wish to thank Berg Publishers for the patience and support, and in particular Maike Bohn and Kathryn Earle.

It is unusual for an editor to dedicate a volume which does not just cover his or her work alone. However, the making of this book was closely interwoven with a long difficult time for me and my family. Reading chapters interfered with visits to doctors and therapists due to the illness and convalescence of my younger daughter. Her admirable strength, together with the wonderful support of my elder daughter, made work and life (again) possible for my wife and me. Hence, it is to Sarah and Cassandra that I wish to dedicate this book.

Peter Scholliers
Brussels

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Part I
Overture

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Meals, Food Narratives, and Sentiments of Belonging in Past and Present

Peter Scholliers

A Starter: Some Meditations on Gastronomy

Allow me to introduce the general theme of this book by referring to a moment of my personal history. In 1968, I was fifteen years old, I lived in Brussels and I was desperately seeking to affirm my personality. Medium-long hair, dark clothes, left-wing sympathies, and a lively interest in rock music seemed to provide possibilities to count me in with both nearby (hip school friends) and more distant groups (Amsterdam *provos*). The thing that definitely gave me a special status was my ardent rejection of red meat due to an intense aversion to its smell and flavour, as well as rebellion against my parents' attempts to make me eat it. My father opposed me more fiercely than my mother did (today, I wonder whether this was a purely individual reaction or whether it was part of his view of how to raise a son, in other words, of masculinity). I needed to justify myself again and again, not only to my close relatives but also to a large number of people in various situations (friends and their parents, trips, parties, school). My attitude was given the erroneous but (to me, at least) attractive name of vegetarianism. Appropriate literature and contacts with congenial people provided me with arguments that included political, dietetic, economic and philosophical ones. This struggle was hard because red meat was highly valued in my immediate and wider milieu (by the way, my grandfather had been a butcher), and it had formed part of my family's daily behaviour ever since I could remember.¹ Little by little, my vegetarianism positioned me more clearly: it gave me a particular status in the eyes of others and in my own eyes.

With this very personal introductory note I wish to illustrate the role of food in the representation and identity of a person, and to stress that this process operates through various media: the individual, a close and a distant group of declared peers, a 'contrasting' group, and a mixed group of remote mediators that includes teachers, journalists, scientists and other producers of ideology. Definitely, the relationship between food and identity is a complex one.

This relationship is caught under its simplest form by the saying 'You are what you eat', quoted by many food researchers, sometimes under the form of the

pertinent question ‘if we are what we eat, who are we’ (Gabaccia, 1998, p. 9), or in its geographical version ‘we are where we eat’ (Bell and Valentine, 1997). Although in some cases food delineates the ‘I’, the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ very clearly (for example, in *kosher* food), this saying is surely a far-reaching, simplistic and imperious allegation.² True, its simplicity has been and still is attractive in identifying the peoples of the world. For instance, in his *La nouvelle Héloïse*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau suggested that ‘one may find an indication of the nature of people in the food they prefer’, and he went on to characterise the Italians, the Swiss, the British and the French according to their taste for, successively, vegetables, dairy products, meat, and wine (cited in Bourre, 1990, pp. 43–4). Similarly, the Irish were called ‘potato people’ by the English in the nineteenth century, and the Sicilians were named ‘macaroni eaters’ by Northern Italians in the sixteenth century. Today, such accordance of nation with food is convenient in promoting one’s own country on the cultural world map (for instance, the resistance by the *Francogastrie* against the alleged *macdonaldisation* of France: Pitte, 1991; Fischler, 1996). And, let’s admit it, we all tend to identify other countries with food.³ Surely, such direct and comprehensive assimilation between food and (national) identity should be questioned.

Let me come back to my personal history to explore somewhat further this relationship. In my milieu, vegetarianism was exceptional in the late 1960s: how did it tempt me, and where did it come from? I first reacted against a meat-eating culture and ditto education, and it was only in a later phase that I turned to other foodstuffs that were new to me (*genuine* vegetarian recipes). Also, it was in this later phase that my version of vegetarianism somewhat influenced my family’s food habits. By opposing to a ‘food regime’ a *new* food regime emerged directly from the *old* one, maintaining some features of it (I would have the sauce, but not the meat). This indicates that diet and identity are not ‘given’ or just ‘out there’ ready to grab, but that both are interpreted, adapted or rejected according to one’s needs, means and intentions. Thus, the extent of identification is significant. As a fifteen year old I found that food operated as a perfect vehicle for my identification with a group or, at least, with my perception of that group, but I would not have called myself a vegetarian all of the time, nor would other people have done so. Other values and (self) representations did matter, and I must admit (with a hot dog in my hand at a football game) that at times these overruled my anti-meat attitude.

So, can food operate as the sole factor in the process of identification of a group or an entire nation? Or does food have its place within a broader set of values (linked to religion, age or occupation), of which some are closely tied to the diet (for example, ‘impure’, ‘healthy’ or ‘fancy’ food), while others have no link to food whatsoever? Is the position of food flexible, or on the contrary, continuously pivotal (or trivial) in identity formation? This is an intricate but, I think, important

question. Consider, for example, religions' classification of foods as edible and non-edible by means of very severe, codified norms: Muslims should not consume pork or alcohol, Catholics should not eat meat on Friday, Jews should separate milk and meat, and Hindus should not touch cow meat. Transgressing these norms would imply punishment and even exclusion. What, then, should one think of the following violation: when in 1720 the Ottoman ambassador, Mehmed efendi, visited France, French observers noted that the ambassador strictly forbade his servants to drink wine, but that he himself enjoyed a glass of wine in secret, while his retinue (including his son) drank wine in public, of which the ambassador did not disapprove (Mehmed, 1981, 229). This example makes me wonder about the strength of norms with regard to food classification, the group's cohesion and its acceptance of transgressions, social discrimination vis-à-vis food norms, and the temporal and spatial dimension of these norms. If food is indeed a factor of importance in the formation of identity, what role does it play exactly, how does it relate to other values, and does it hold a constant position?

Such questions led me to invite historians, sociologists and anthropologists to explore the way in which identities were built, interpreted, negotiated, narrated and altered by means of food. Quite intentionally, this book takes the reader to a great variety of times and places. It could not be otherwise: diverse research traditions (involving methods, approaches, sources) are necessary in order to investigate the complexity of the theme, to consider various settings, periods and situations, in short to discuss and interpret judiciously the significance of eating and drinking in identity formation. It seems appropriate now to look briefly at the notion and the importance of identity: does it really matter?

One's Place in the World

Nowadays, social psychologists view identity as a person's own definition in terms of group membership, which entails intergroup behaviour, or the identification of a person with the norms, ideals and manners of a group (Turner, 1999). Notably, identities are constructed through differences with others (Hall, 1996, pp. 4–5), and the aim is to achieve collective self-esteem and group solidarity. According to the degree of commitment to a group, there may be total identification or only in part (Doosje et al, 1999, pp. 86–7). Social theorists claim that 'identity' is crucial to all people: it allows one to situate oneself and the Other, to give a sense to existence, and to order the world; it forges norms and values.⁴ Identity contributes to how individuals and groups perceive and construct society, how they give meaning, and how they (re)act, think, vote, socialise, buy, rejoice, perceive, work, eat, judge or relax. They do so by referring to economic, social, cultural and political conditions, events and expectations, and, while doing so, they affect the economic, the social, the cultural and the political (Ruano-Borbalan, 1998, pp. 1–13; Woodward, 1997, pp. 13–5).

Since the mid-1980s, this notion of identity has come resolutely to the fore in virtually all social research aimed at explaining present-day transformations of society. It is argued that the breakdown of traditional forms of identity (such as nation, family, class) has led to a search for new forms (such as region, friends, groups), which would account for identity crises and social and political commotions of various intensities (Du Gay, 1996, p. 1). Historical research has used this 'identity crisis' to explain the emergence and decline of strong national feelings (e.g. Haupt, 1996), and recently historians have connected identity to ethnicity, gender, and occupation as well. 'Identity' seems to be well on its way to acquiring a significant position in the spectrum of conceptual tools for studying the past and present.⁵

Nonetheless, it is a problematic concept. Social researchers have discerned diverse types of identities, while different theories have been confronted with one another. One distinction refers to 'primary' and 'secondary' identities, the former associated with an identity that is rather more stable and community-based (e.g. the family), and the latter with an identity that is flexible and with precise aims, often institutionally based (e.g. a political party, an occupation, a football club). The 'secondary' group may comprise several identities (Lipiansky, 1998, pp. 148–9). Such views suggest a hierarchy with a 'real' (given) and a 'constructed' (manipulatable) identity. Yet, some theorists argue that it is impossible to make distinctions. Identities are always multiple, and they form the synthesis of various categories (Dortier, 1998, pp. 51–6). Especially the latter view implies flexibility. By using identity strategies or tactics,⁶ people may want to adopt a new identity while discarding an older one. Other theorists warn against confusion between identity and 'role': roles (such as political sympathy, or football fan) merely organise functions of people, while identity provides meaning, and therefore frames the roles. Identity relates, for example, to nationalism or ethnicity (Castells, 1999, pp. 7–11).

To avoid this complexity and confusion, it may be preferable to concentrate on the notion of *identification*. Identification is more than just sharing the common characteristics of a group or an ideal; it is a never-ending process of construction, or even a 'fantasy of incorporation' (Hall, 1996, p. 2). In this view, identification operates through language and practice, or more appropriately because of the interconnection between language and practice, through discourse (as used by M. Foucault) and narratives (in the sense of how people think, tell and write about [their] lives). Through language, people internalise the attitudes of a group (Du Gay, 1996, p. 29), and they integrate and explain experiences, memories and expectations (Valentine, 1999, pp. 495–6). This may happen very consciously and publicly (for example, a gang of youngsters calling themselves 'The Jets', using slang and graffiti), or unconsciously (for example, the self-evident utilisation of the categories 'workers', 'yuppies' or 'France'). Implicitly or explicitly, this implies judgements. Through practice, people participate vividly in the attitudes and rituals

of the group (Ruano-Borbalan, 1998, p. 3). Again, this may happen very consciously, openly and in a socially controlled manner (e.g. the mineworkers' annual celebration in most European mining communities), or on a more automatic, evident basis (for example, church attendance). Both language and practice combine in a process of learning, which is of course crucial in early phases of life but which never stops (Chiva, 1996, pp. 15–9). Discourse and narratives allow people to define, recognise, interpret, negotiate, assimilate, reject, delineate and exclude, and hence, contribute to identifying themselves and others, in a constant dialectical process between the self and the other.

Feelings of Belonging, and Food

How does food fit within processes of identification, and how has this relationship been approached? In the 1960s and 1970s Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas stressed the role of food as signifier, classifier and identity builder. Giving sense to the world, and the ordering of people and events, operate through elementary, everyday practices to which eating and drinking are utterly crucial (Woodward, 1997, pp. 29–35). 'Food anthropology' devoted itself to the study of food in relation to one's own group, to other groups and to the sacred and the gods. Although this research influenced studies where the idea of social demarcation through food was central, 'identity' remained marginal. Very generally, food sciences in the 1970s dealt with famine and poverty, food production and consumption, health implications, social distinction, and descriptive studies of feast meals (Mennell et al, 1992).

In the 1980s food studies underwent rapid development because of many changes occurring in the world of food itself, and because of the so-called cultural turn in the social sciences. A great variety of new themes was explored (taste, eating disorders, haute cuisine, elaborate social differences etc., to which the names of S. Mennell, C. Grignon or J. Goody can be linked). Similarly, as in the social sciences in general, the notion of identity was taken up, to which food was directly and intimately linked. This is strongly supported by the claim that sentiments of belonging via food do not only include the act of classification and consumption, but also the preparation, the organisation, the taboos, the company, the location, the pleasure, the time, the language, the symbols, the representation, the form, the meaning and the art of eating and drinking. This close connection between food and identity did not only emerge in academic circles, but also in wider spheres. An example of the latter is the labelling of a category of people that seem typical for the booming urban life in the 1980s and 1990s: the 'foodies' or well-to-do epicureans whose main activity involves eating at fashionable restaurants (Simmonds, 1990, pp. 130–2; Macintosh, 1996, p. 50). Another example is a magazine's affirmation of the loss of Belgium's national identity in the summer of 1999 due to cattlefeed and chickenfeed poisoning.⁷

The view of the close relationship between food and identity is summarised in Claude Fischler's article which opened with the confident statement that 'Food is central to our sense of identity' (Fischler, 1988, p. 275). Eating is of course a biological act, he argues, but it is much more than that. Food crosses the border between the 'outside' and the 'inside', and this 'principle of incorporation' touches upon the very nature of a person. This is why eating and drinking matter greatly to all people, and why, as reported in some cases of groups of migrants, people retain some food habits when language or other cultural expressions tend to be forgotten. This 'incorporation' is the basis of collective identity, Fischler continues. Because people *absorb* food, they seize the opportunity to demarcate their own and the other group. People eating similar food are trustworthy, good, familiar, and safe; but people eating unusual food give rise to feelings of distrust, suspicion and even disgust. Food taboos formalise to an extreme the position with regard to particular foods, hence the existence of a culinary classification and norms, which attribute to food and its eaters a given place in the world. Nevertheless, people

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Figure 1.1 'The cavern of the *Soleil d'Or*', painting by Henri Evenepoel (Nice 1872 – Paris 1899); oil on canvas, 1896 (Brussels Museum of Modern Art, inv. # 7668, Copyright IRPA-KIK Brussels). Popular commensality: drinking, talking and meeting in a (not so luxury) café of the Belle Epoque

being omnivores gives them the chance to innovate, experiment and adapt norms, willingly or not, consciously or not. For Fischler, the present-day alterations in the world of food (technologically as well as culturally) are causing a crisis of the identification with food ('What are we actually eating?') and, hence, a crisis of identity of the eater ('Who are we, then?'). This reasoning about the 'principle of incorporation' gains its full importance when it is well understood that eating is part of a system of classification and representation, and that it operates in the 'register of the imagination', which is why 'cooking helps to give food and its eaters a place in the world' (Fischler, 1988).

The close relationship between identification and food is to be found in an increasing number of recent sociological, anthropological, ethnographical, geographical, philosophical and gender studies (for example, Giachetti, 1996; Bell and Valentine, 1997; Caplan, 1997; Jansen, 1997; Kanafani-Zahar, 1997; Counihan and Kaplan, 1998; Korsmeyer, 1999; Lentz, 1999; Valentine, 1999; Wilk, 1999; Bernard, 2000 – this list is not exhaustive).⁸ These researchers have few doubts about the full assimilation of food with identity formation and conservation. Lentz sees food and drink as 'strong markers of social boundaries', Kanafani-Zahar discovers that 'social values circulate through bread', Korsmeyer writes that 'those who choose to eat together tacitly recognize their fellow eaters as saliently equal', while Valentine agrees with the 'evidence that food plays an important part in the production of "family" identities'.

However, other social researchers doubt this relationship. Alan Warde accepts that the vegetarian and the gourmet make a statement about themselves, but he argues that for most people food is a 'marginal way of expressing personal identity, and in any case, operates in much the same way as it did in earlier periods'. Food, he goes on, is just one of many ways by which to express identity, and, moreover, a minor one. Many people eat, and watch others eating, without any judgement. They care about sufficient, affordable and familiar food, and they are not preoccupied with visual signs of fashion and categorisation. Also, most people would not be able to decipher codes related to food, and would not know or care about *Beaujolais nouveau*. Hence, Warde concludes that 'there are limits to the capacity of food to express personal identity' (Warde, 1997, pp. 199–200). I think Warde is right in questioning the place and importance of food as an identity builder, and in stressing the functional aspect of food. With regard to the former, this volume hopes to investigate the contribution of food to identity formation in various cases rather than to degrade radically the role of food in it or to advance general affirmations. As regards the latter, I think that Warde underestimates the bond between use value and identity value. Many people's choice is inevitably formed socially through discourse and narratives (as argued above). Social demarcation and identification are present in 'simple', 'self-evident' and 'unconscious' matters, as was proposed by Lévi-Strauss, Douglas and, more recently, by Pierre Bourdieu

(1979, p. 448). So-called self-evident consumption and particularly food are relevant to people's identity even if they themselves pay little attention to it.⁹

Identity and Historical Food Studies

The above sociologists and anthropologists attended many historians' meetings, but I think that they were not always clearly understood by the historians. This may be linked to the hegemonic historical paradigm from, say, 1960 to 1990. In 1992 a survey of the historical writing on modern diets in various European countries was published (Teuteberg, 1992). For the previous thirty years it showed the dominance of studies dealing with production, prices, per capita consumption and calories. A large majority of food historians wished to contribute to major questions of social and economic history (for example, the debate on the standard of living during the Industrial Revolution). The chapter on French historiography is illustrative of this interest. Up to the early 1980s, French food historians dealt essentially with agrarian and starvation crises, and with the calculation of food intake in particular regions and institutions, both covered by the label of Fernand Braudel's *vie matérielle*. The 'psycho-social orientation', inspired by Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, reacted against the quantitative supremacy without much success (with the noteworthy exception of J.-P. Aron). In 1992, the author of the survey on France could mention only one, albeit prolific, representative of this direction: J.-L. Flandrin who concentrated on the history of taste and meals (Barlösius, 1992). In 1999 the same Flandrin presented a brief overview of French historical food research in which he deplored and condemned vehemently the enduring bias towards a deceptive quantitative approach (Flandrin, 1999, p. 19). An equally weak presence of cultural approaches may be found in most other countries which appeared in the 1992 survey (there were, of course, exceptions such as in Britain, Edward Thompson's attention to the moral dimension of food riots in England, or Stephen Mennell's study on taste). Perhaps significantly, the subject index of this book lacks an entry for 'identity', while 'calorie' has 13, 'budgets' 19 and 'prices' 15 entries.¹⁰

Deceptive or not, the quantitative study of food continues to entice (new) ardent supporters. For example, Claude and Christiane Grignon argue that quantitative methods are most appropriate to learning about trends in food consumption which include the evolution of taste (Grignon & Grignon, 1999). Of course, the cultural interest was not absent in history writing prior to 1990. Class inequality was described in terms of calories, cost and expenditures, and occasionally the cultural appeared in relation to sociable drinking or luxury food (respectively an early and a late example, Burnett, 1979 and Scholliers, 1993). Some studies were devoted entirely to feasting, drinking or gastronomy (for example, Aron, 1967; Brennan, 1988), while aristocratic and bourgeois culinary exploits have retained the interest

of historians for longer (for example, Bauer, 1967; Gottschalk, 1948). Many of these ‘cultural’ studies indicate eating and drinking as social signifiers, but the very notion of ‘identity formation’ with its connotations of (self) perception remains absent.

Historians became interested in the concept of identity in the second half of the 1990s. Some of them became familiar with the explicit claims of Lévi-Strauss, Douglas or Fischler with regard to the importance of food in identity formation. Two books with contributions by historians, sociologists and ethnologists may illustrate this.¹¹ In 1996 Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari edited a magnificent collection in which the notion of ‘cultural identity’ is present. Significantly, ‘identity’ comes to the fore from the moment the book considers confrontations between different ‘cultures’. This applies to the dichotomy ‘Barbarians’ (*le cru*) and ‘Romans’ (*le cuit*), and most explicitly to the encounter in the Middle Ages of the Christian Westerners with ‘others’ when food (and particularly pork, wine and bread) defined people more clearly than before (Flandrin & Montanari, 1996, pp. 319–22). Yet, although issues of social, religious, geographical and national demarcation are present throughout the whole book, ‘identity’ does not form a separate, consistent tool for historical understanding (for instance, the twenty-page subject index lacks an entry for *identité*). Conversely, in 1997 Hans-Jürgen Teuteberg, Gerhard Neumann and Alois Wierlacher published a collection in which ‘food’ and ‘identity’ are seen as Siamese twins. Its introduction frankly and unequivocally claims that ‘Speisen (. . .) zur Abgrenzung gesellschaftlicher Gruppen und Schichten (. . .) dienen’, while it affirms that the position of food in identity formation is simply pivotal (Teuteberg, Neumann & Wierlacher, 1997, p. 13). This collection opens with theoretical essays on the link between food and identity, while most of the empirical contributions focus on the role of eating and drinking in regional and national identities. Thus, gulash, Sachertorte and macaroni are intimately connected to Hungarians, Austrians and Italians (both within and outside their countries, and irrespective of the borders of these countries in previous centuries).

In both collections, the link between identity and food is implicit and, in general, without much controversy. The same goes for other recent historical food studies that make use of the term of identity (for example, Gabaccia, 1998; Schrover, 1999). These historians thoughtfully analyse food habits, and they often discover and designate common characteristics of peoples’ diet, preferences, taboos etc., thus constructing the identity of a group, a community or a nation. This is a legitimate way of studying the past, even if contemporaries themselves hardly noticed shared food habits. Here, it is the historian who defines social, national, gender, ethnic or other borders. Such a view, however, does not fit in with the social researchers’ concerns of sentiments of belonging, nor with their analyses of discourse and narrative, nor with questions about the precise role of food in peoples’

identity making. As far as I can tell, such concerns are quite new in historical research. Only few historians have looked at questions of how food was used to build identities in the past: some have interviewed people (Holm, 1997; Beyers, 1999), solicited a wide variety of written and iconographic sources, or have pleaded for the re-reading of 'old' sources (Flandrin, 1999, pp. 22, 29; Wildt, 1995, pp. 24, 27).¹² Michael Wildt very clearly opposes two approaches to the past, which concur with the two views on identity: he distinguishes a familiar approach 'from the outside' and an alternative 'from within'. The latter openly defies the perspective 'from the outside', and wishes to examine the way people experienced daily practices, how they fabricated representations of food, and how a new language of consumption came into being (Wildt, 1995).

The Scope of this Book

This leads me to the specificity of this book. It opens with a chapter by Claude Grignon about eating and drinking in company, thus addressing a crucial issue of identity formation. 'Inclusion' and 'exclusion' with regard to meals are refined practices that may forge and strengthen a group. He presents various types of commensality, and hence various meanings of eating together. To learn about the limits and the internal hierarchy of a group, he stresses the importance of studying who is eating with whom, where, when, why, who is inviting and what formality is used. Carmen Sarasúa provides an example of highly intimate, everyday commensality of a noble family of La Mancha around 1800. She addresses the question of class identity, by considering what the family ate, how much money was spent, and when particular food was eaten. She invokes the concept of honour with regard to the diet of this family: despite bankruptcy, it was a matter of status and self-representation to send servants daily to the market and the shops to purchase whatever (and whenever) the family wished to eat.

Michael Wildt too addresses the question of class identity. He shows the shaping of a new 'food regime' in Germany in the 'long' 1950s. The daily wish of workers' families to eat abundantly as a sign of normality in the late 1940s concurred with the rhetoric of the retailers' advertisements. In the early 1960s, this dialectical process became more complex (slim trend, exotic cuisine), which questions the likelihood of a distinct working-class identity in an 'affluent society'. The strength of rhetoric is also shown in Paolo Sorcinelli's chapter on the Italian working-class diet in the twentieth century. He considers the view of a large variety of actors in bourgeois, Fascist and 'modern' Italy, and he describes the way the Italian working classes were introduced to the virtues of a simple diet, and how persistent propaganda put bread right in the middle of this diet. The author shows a nice example of an attempt to use a specific food item as a means of identification with the ideal of a strong, unified nation: bread was presented as particularly well suited to Italian stomachs.

Sorcinelli concentrates on food consumption and actual calorie intake, and confronts this with the rhetoric ‘from above’. A similar approach is offered by Martin Bruegel in his chapter on sugar consumption in nineteenth-century France. He shows that the shift of sugar from a luxury to a commonly accepted commodity before the First World War owed a great deal to the campaign by the sugar lobby and the state against the ‘popular prejudice’ that regarded sugar as pointless. Bruegel concludes that the working-class resistance to sugar consumption imposed by bourgeois norms was an expression of working-class identity, which illustrates a negative connotation of a food item with identity formation. Of course, identification by means of food and drink also operates for groups other than social classes. An example is provided by Lynn Martin, who explores the bond between old age and alcohol drinking in England, France and Italy from circa 1300 to 1700. He surveys contemporaries’ perceptions of alcohol-drinking old men and women, and confronts these with the actual accessibility of alcohol. Martin stresses the portraying of the drinking old as a cultural and social construct that implied both praise and denigration, both understanding and condemnation. To him, alcohol was clearly a means by which to identify the elderly.

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Figure 1.2 ‘An evening’, painting by Frans Van Holder (Brussels 1881 – Geneva 1919); oil on canvas, 1912 (Brussels Museum of Modern Art, inv. # 4064, Copyright IRPA-KIK Brussels). Intimate commensality: after-dinner of a well-to-do family

Sorcinelli deals with the middle-class attempt to link the virtue of a simple diet to class identity, but he also touches upon the forging of national identity: the glorification of massive bread consumption not only incorporated the land labourers of Tuscany or Lazio into the working class, but would also fully integrate them into the Italian nation. Such multiple identity formation is a complex and enduring process. Inger Johanne Lyngø explores this in the case of the ‘modern’ Norwegian diet, about which she writes that it is not national in the sense of being Norwegian, but primarily in the sense of containing new scientific insights. She marks a climacteric moment of this national identity formation, the 1936 Oslo Nutrition exhibition, and analyses the creation of a national diet (symbolised by a glass of ‘pure, fresh, white milk’). This leads her to consider a wide variety of phenomena and developments, which include the exhibition’s buildings, the new hygienic requirements, agricultural performance, vitamins, and the response of the target groups. Lyngø shows conclusively that food and national identity constitute a highly complex relationship, which goes far beyond a simple identification of, in this case, ‘milk’ and ‘Norway’.

Would the connotation between ‘champagne’ and ‘France’ perhaps be more straightforward? Kolleen Guy uses a brief, but crucial episode circa 1910 to investigate this identification. ‘France’ was perhaps readily linked to ‘champagne’ throughout the world, but she shows that this identification caused great commotion within France. The blending of wines from different *pays*, and their imprecise naming jeopardised the fame of French products, which led to a big dispute about the legal delimitation of the Champagne region. This involved producers, Parliament, traders and consumers, and attempts to appropriate the French Revolution, to challenge the historic construct of ‘champagne’, and to rewrite the history of pre-1789 *terroirs*. Paradoxically, this fight about regional identity was embedded in the striving to maintain a strong and unified national identity. A very different contribution to national identity formation is presented by Amy Bentley. She focuses on open social conflict, by exploring the bond between food riots and food disturbances, particular foods and the latter’s significance for a nation. Since E.P. Thompson’s work, the role of a given food in riots has been well established. However, Bentley wishes to go beyond this, and she pleads for an in-depth exploration of the very food at the core of the disturbance, whether this is tea, milk, meat or onions. To her, food products in rioting possess a very strong symbolic meaning. Moving to the second half of the twentieth century, she evokes the example of Coca-Cola, which became a sign of American-ness first in the United States and later throughout the world: denying access to this soft drink, and thus denying identification with ‘America’, caused sit-ins and other forms of protest.

The contributions to this book confirm that matters of identity formation appear most clearly when two or more groups confront each other. Willy Jansen’s chapter on (French) Algeria illustrates this marvellously well. As a participating observer

and thus using her own experience (and narrative), she notes that French colonisation brought about a new type of bread, which led to a genuine conflict: traditional, home-made bread and modern factory-produced bread had quite distinct meanings with cultural, religious and gender entanglements. Naturally, she deals with other foods (pork) and drinks (alcohol) too. She focuses on the crisis and the changes that conflicting but co-existing food regimes brought about. Once again the complex link between food and identity appears: this is not a matter of simple identification, but it is a complicated, dialectical process of adaptation, rejection and interpretation. Conflictual identities appear in other chapters too. Martin presents the physicians' different views of old people drinking, Guy refers to a war between two wine-producing regions, both claiming the ownership of the 'champagne' label, and both fighting over issues of representations of their own and the other region. Bruegel studies the way the sugar lobby depicted the rejection of sugar by the *classe populaire*, while Sorcinelli surveys the perceptions and the attitudes towards food of successive state forms in Italy.

Such confrontations (in the above cases, between bourgeois representatives and the people; between regions; between the state and the working classes) are tightly linked to economic, social and ideological factors. I wish to emphasise that almost all chapters reveal underlying economic rationales (milk producers in Norway, sugar merchants in France, agricultural autarky in Italy, commercial interests in the Marne region, and so on), which all had links to discourse and narrative (to stick to the same examples, the 1936 Nutritional Exhibition, the proclamation of sugar as an excellent provider of energy, the presentation of a poor diet as an asset, the making of the myth of Dom Pérignon).

A more general conclusion to this book would relate to the way in which the authors have studied the past, and to the relevance of their approach. The book's subject tempted most of the authors to study the past 'from within', rather than to look at it as a distant, impartial observer 'from the outside'. Lyngø focuses on the 'web of narratives', Bentley advocates a 'Geertzian thick description' of food, Martin uses a huge volume of contemporaries' writings (from Michelangelo and Erasmus to Chaucer and More), while Bruegel relies extensively on contemporary texts by social observers, philanthropists and scientists; Guy applies 'close reading' of a report from a public hearing, Sorcinelli uses contemporary writings to analyse discourses, and Wildt confronts working-class families' accounts with the rhetoric of a big retailer's magazine and by stories of housewives. This is a striking feature, that undoubtedly creates a difference with many earlier historical food studies, and which indeed allows adequately the study of identification processes via food. Narrative, thick description and rhetoric are clearly present in this volume.

None of the authors define 'identity' a priori, nor would they verify a 'given' identity by means of food. Some adhere implicitly to a very broad view (à la Castells), where national identity is central but certainly not 'given'. Others put

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Figure 1.3 'At dawn', painting by Charles Hermans (Brussels 1839 – Menton 1924); oil on canvas, 1875 (Brussels Museum of Modern Art, inv. # 2812, Copyright IRPA-KIK Brussels). The painter depicts opposite social classes: well-to-do merrymakers leaving a luxury café, and encountering (young) labourers on their way to work

class, region or age at the centre of attention. Bruegel, Sarasúa and Wildt use social class as a conceptual tool, while Martin looks at the role of (old) age. Region is present in Guy's and Sarasúa's paper. Religion appears in Jansen's and (only briefly) in Sarasúa's paper, while ethnicity is present in Jansen's contribution and gender in Bentley's, Martin's and Wildt's. This enumeration shows the inevitability of multiple identity formation and, hence, the necessity to conceptualise cautiously and investigate empirically the formation of identity. Surely, this goes beyond food and drink.

All authors consider the relationship between food and identity without a dogmatic starting point, but with the intention of cautious, open study of a particular good, place or period. Underlying is the notion that this relationship should be investigated on each occasion. This approach leads to scepticism with regard to a constant close bond between food and identity. Jansen shows the limitations of bread as an identity marker in (French) Algeria, although she emphasises at length the symbolic and social significance of home-made bread. She also shows shifts

in appreciation between French and Arab bread according to different (cultural) situations, which illustrates the flexible role of food in identity-building. Bruegel demonstrates the changing significance of, and identification with, sugar in nineteenth-century France. Grignon's various types of commensality entail very different forms of eating and drinking and, hence, identification. He concludes that commensality is one of the techniques by which identity can be defined and maintained. Note the words 'one of the techniques' and 'can be defined', which shows that Grignon is judicious about the role of commensality and food in identity formation. In other words, there is more to this world than food.

A main conclusion of this book would therefore simply be that food does matter to identity formation, but that sweeping claims in this respect must be avoided. Would this not question the strong claims about identity and its role in giving sense to the world? If one accepts the existence of a close bond between 'identity' and 'food' on the one hand, while on the other hand some of the papers in this book show that people use and 'think' food in a flexible way, then I cannot but conclude that 'identity' is indeed adaptable and interpretable. This may lead to a reconceptualisation of the whole notion of identity and one's place in the world. Nonetheless, each contribution to this book does underline a bond between food and drink, and identity, albeit of various intensities. Sarasúa's noble household shows a very strong, stable bond between food and rural class identity, while Jansen's account of Algerian bread illustrates an adaptable, changeable bond. Historical empiricism, thus, refines the theorists' assumptions about the role of food in identity formation.

Food as a signifier of femininity and masculinity in the past is also tackled in this collection. Bentley stresses the very active role of women in food riots, and Jansen shows the gendered production of food, with its changes, and the ensuing and shifting social positions of men and women. Martin shows contemporaries' different valuations of old men and women drinking, and Wildt notices the reaction of women against the introduction of canned food in the 1950s, claiming that home-made preserves tasted much better; furthermore, he not only emphasises the attention a women's magazine paid to slimness, but he also deals with the emergence of the image (and the practice) of the 'modern housewife' in post-war Germany.

Finally, various authors implicitly suggest an alternative way of studying the standard of living in the past. The analysis of discourses and narratives, implying attention to both language and practice, provides ample information about people's perceptions of daily routines. Contemporaries described and judged, measured and estimated, painted and (later) photographed and filmed, commented on and condemned the way of living, the spending and earning, the meals and drinking, the feasts and snacks, plus all changes that have occurred in these domains. Almost all the papers in this book testify to perceptions by individuals and official bodies.

