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Snapshots and portraits Part 1

A taste of Nordic food culture(s) by way of
conclusion

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A taste of Nordic food culture(s) by way of conclusion

From “Palatable worlds” to palatable words

- 1 Twenty years before the two workshops on Nordic Food Culture that initiated this special issue of Anthropology of Food (AoFood), another Nordic workshop focused on cultural aspects of food. Several Nordic sociologists gathered together to discuss eating patterns in a cultural and sociological approach. This colloquium gave rise to *Palatable worlds. Sociocultural food studies* (Fürst and al., 1991) an innovative book which inspired many food researchers.
- 2 From this perspective, *AoFood*'s special issue on Nordic Food Culture(s) provides not only continuity (if only because several authors of this issue did publish in *Palatable worlds*) but also breakdown, by its multidisciplinary and variety of subjects. With more than 15 texts, from short pieces and interviews to scientific peer review articles, this *AoFood*'s special issue gives an overview of the field of interests held by Nordic food researchers at the beginning of the 21st century, involving topics as varied as health, nutrition, obesity, hygiene, globalisation, the “destruction” of the meal, traditional food, place of origin, “terroir”, and the New Nordic Kitchen and the restaurant elite.

Some thoughts while we clear the table

- 3 The article by Holm & al. is based on a Nordic study which was conducted fifteen years ago under the coordination of Unni Kjærnes. Meal patterns in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden were investigated to observe if they were dissolving because of grazing or vagabond feeding whenever and wherever individuals feel like it. To avoid making false generalisations on the basis of cultural, national, or ideological prejudices and to be sure that they did not take for granted different meaning of concepts of eating, the researcher saw the need for deconstruction and reconstruction of everyday words such as “a meal”, “a breakfast”, “a dinner”, etc. While a word such as *frokost* is used differently in the Scandinavian countries (meaning breakfast in Norwegian and Sweden, but lunch in Danish), a term like *måltid* (meal) has different connotations too.
- 4 Asking the question of whether there is one or several Nordic food cultures may thus seem pointless. Yet, are there too many or too large differences between the Nordic countries to speak about Nordic food culture? Are there any shared food cultural characteristics within the Nordic region that can be distinguished from those in other regions? Moreover, what about the concept of “food culture” in the academic field? What is the impact of the academic field in this new visibility? Are food cultures becoming perceptible once they are expressed through words and language, and if so how important are then Nordic and European gastronomy texts in this process? Does food culture eventually appear through “palatable words” - in books and discourses- ? Could the focus on taste in culinary texts, as manifestos, explain the revival of food culture launched by the *New Nordic Kitchen*?
- 5 We hope that this special issue on Nordic Food Culture(s) provides some answers to these questions, although “It is not the answer which throws light on an issue, it is the question” (Ionesco, 1969).
- 6 As we say in Nordic countries “*Takk for maten*”, or in English: “We hope you enjoyed the meal”!

Gastronomic thoughts on this “meal”

- 7 The starters consist of 5 interviews covering all the Nordic countries. Five food experts give a general overview of eating patterns and eating habits in the Nordic countries, dealing with what is considered as food culture, at the national and the Nordic level. Be they historian, nutritionist, ethnologist or sociologist, the interviewed researchers described a fascinating food

culture, where the agency of eaters is torn between self-control and state regulation, and where political interests are embedded in market development.

Discussing the menu while doing the dishes– An overview

- 8 The scientific part of this issue begins with an introduction framing the research questions linked to Nordic Food Culture and presenting this issue. Then comes the first article, from Lotte Holm and her co-authors who underline the existence of a structured meal pattern among Nordic peoples. They also observe that eating, in the Nordic countries, is “strongly socially coordinated, first and foremost with reference to the organization of the working day.” Common structures and social values within the four countries studied create both an impression of a western and an eastern Nordic region and of a certain unity. While the authors propose that welfare state models of the Nordic region obviously contribute to a standardization of meal patterns, Anita Borch and Gun Roos emphasise the same “welfare state” impact. Studying obesity governance through public private partnerships (PPP), they show in their article that the change in consumers’ eating and exercise patterns are similarly shaped across the different welfare state models in Europe. The authors assumed that the PPP (165 PPP were selected in the 28 European countries studied) aimed at fighting obesity would vary depending on national welfare regimes’ views of the concept of responsibility. Since responsibility tends to be placed at the governmental level in the Nordic social-democratic welfare regimes, the assumption was that Nordic PPP would rather influence changes through regulatory regulations and structures than through information. However, they found that the private sector played a major role, even in Nordic countries. This underlines the hypothesis of mutual influence between southern and northern Europe, with standardization and harmonization of regulations outside the Nordic countries and in the whole Europe. As Appadurai wrote “The central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization.”(Appadurai 1990: 295). A growing consumer focus on local foods has been understood as a kind of resistance to globalization (*AoFood* n.4-2005 and n. S2, 2007), and has also been described as a quality turn within contemporary western societies (Goodman, 2002). In his article describing the establishment of the systems for Geographical Indications in Norway, Atle Hegnes highlights the top-down effort of cultural homogenisation from the Norwegian agricultural authorities. Since the concept of *terroir* has no clear significance in Norwegian food culture, employing PDO, PGI, and TSG schemes established by the European Union in 1992 has taken on considerable cultural adaption work. Hegnes shows how both meaning and knowledge have been translated and how products have been progressively transformed during the processes of implementation of Protected Designation. Similar to the argument made by Borch & Roos, Hegnes’ article is an example upon how international agreements shape and transform food culture. Moreover, Hegnes exemplifies how local practice and global regulations are interlinked, and henceforth, how Norway in this case is very much a part of a larger European food culture where products are becoming more alike. Nevertheless, the Norwegian food culture seems challenging for those introducing the new initiatives: alteration and adaption to international regulation bring about something new with reference to the local or national context; if not traditional, but perhaps something uniquely Norwegian?
- 9 To better understand the potential specificity of Nordic Food culture, in the issue we introduced voices from an extended “Northern” geographical area, namely Russia and Lithuania. They both underline potential contrasts and compare practices. While the short text written by Alexander Belyi and Antanas Astrauskas about the Greater Lithuanian culinary discourse highlights the complexity of a national definition of food culture when symbols of traditional food derive from a common “cultural pot” and are shared by countries with different political interests, the article written by Olga Gromasheva focuses on a national Russian specificity. Gromasheva emphasises character of “patience” in order to better understand the lack of response to food risks among Russian middleclass mothers. According to Gromasheva, patience constitutes an “old” Russian response to new food risks, such as potential harm from chemical pollutants and new products aimed at children with modern artificial ingredients.

The author argues that to a certain extent this common/dominant reaction delimits the occurrence of risk solidarity among consumers, or what Winson (2010) has claimed to be an “amorphous and broad-based movement that strives to resist the further degradation of food environments” (Winson, 2010: 584). As such, patience becomes a main obstacle for making consumers responsible of their own food safety. In comparison Silje Skuland and Siv Elin Ånestad argue that the increased preoccupation with the nutritional value of foods in Norway, in combination with a strengthened focus upon healthy lifestyles and an amplified responsibility of the individual for living a healthy life, has paved the way for the mainstreaming of the consumption of sports nutrition products. These trendy products are in sharp contrast to ideals of eating natural foods and avoiding food products with artificial ingredients. The authors emphasise the nature of the science of nutrition – nutritionism – in shaping new practices and representations for eating proteins and carbohydrates in order to maximize the effect of physical training. Moreover, nutritionism is voiced in governmental health recommendations as well as by market actors providing these products to consumers. Both Gromasheva and Skuland & Ånestad discuss the responsibility of individuals in making the right choices with regard to consumption and the intermingling regulation by the government and the market. While Gromasheva finds that there is a lack of reaction among Russian consumers, Skuland & Ånestad describe how the internalisation of this responsibility – self-governance – paradoxically brings about a consumption practice quite different from the government’s health recommendations.

10 Lisa Koustrup and her colleagues give evidence for how nutritional science is put to work in Denmark in the counselling of obese children and adolescents. The biomedical discourse voiced by the dietician focuses on food as nutrition. By contrast, the parental food discourse includes nurturing – providing the ‘right’ food – as well as exasperation – not succeeding in feeding the child the proper diet – and moreover, not claiming responsibility – by blaming the obese child. In the dietetic meeting between the dietician, the parents, and the obese child these discourses intermingle and bring forth ideas about “is” and “ought” – about “being” and “becoming” – of the obese child and her future prospects, while the obese child’s voice is not heard. In line with the articles of Skuland & Ånestad and Koustrup & her colleagues exemplify the problematic consequences of the science of nutrition in shaping healthy diets and perhaps how medicalised perspectives on food tend to erase other parts of the food cultural frame in the Nordic societies.

11 Most articles underline the preoccupation of health in Nordic food culture(s) while one of the conclusions by Holm and her colleagues is that food culture is always in a state of transition. Either continuity or transition, but where does this health focus come from? Tenna Jensen’s historical analysis of the consumption of fat in Denmark highlights the close link between the food industry and human health as well as the relationship between product innovation and human needs. Moreover, by exploring the developments and consumption of margarine the author provides a description of general welfare growth during the 20th century as well as persistent differences in class status and urban-rural variations in Denmark. By the way, could this be a “historical wink” at the relationship between policy and market underlined in the articles by Borch & Roos or Skuland & Ånestad? Does the relationship between policy and market in regulation of health in the Nordic countries has longer historical roots than in the Southern part of Europe?

While tidying up the kitchen- Nordic kitchen in a global perspective

12 The areas under discussion in the scientific articles are salient reflections of the dualism named in the introduction, with “traditional Nordic” topics (such as nutrition and health) and “new Nordic” subjects (linked to origin and taste). As a matter of fact, health, nutrition, and overweight issues, as well as food quality and origin, are not only of Nordic, but of European or even of global, interest among food researchers. Those topics are no longer dependent upon national culture or policy, and are highlighted in most western countries. When reading Anita Borch and Gun Roos’ article we can ask whether Nordic culture has an influence on European policy, or whether the Nordic area is politically transformed by global organizations such as

the WHO and the European Union? Eventually can we speak of mutual influences between Northern and Southern European food cultures, with more focus on “healthy” food and body image in the south and more emphasis on quality and taste in the north?

- 13 Although many central food questions are discussed in this *AoFood* special issue, subjects like food prices, food and environment, food and migration, and food patrimony are only partly considered here (but could be the topic of another Nordic issue?).

“Coffee, tea and dessert goodies” – Only for festive dinners?

- 14 As noticed by Holm et al., capturing the essence of the Nordic food culture is quite ambitious. Historical frontiers are complex and variations are huge, at structural and practical levels, but also concerning agriculture, markets, or products on offer. The question about the existence of a Nordic Food Culture is implicitly acknowledged in several articles and short texts but explicitly addressed in the interviews of Henry Notaker and Unni Kjærnes and in the first peer review article by Lotte Holm and her colleagues. Notaker tells us that a society’s or a group’s food culture is not simply the sum of the foods that are eaten but something which contains both the various preparations of dishes, the structuring of the individual courses during a meal, and the structuring of meals during the day and the year, following nature’s seasons or religious or profane feasts and celebrations. This perspective opens both for a single Nordic Food Culture based on common features and for several Nordic Food Cultures based on local specificities. The interview with Unni Kjærnes reminds us not only about the importance of regulation on eating patterns but also underlines a potential common food culture but with several regional or local characteristics, for example the predominance of hot, cooked lunches in eastern regions, Finland and Sweden, and open sandwiches for lunch in western regions, Denmark and Norway.
- 15 Although the articles of this special issue can only give a fragmented picture of contemporary Nordic food cultures, the most central theme is perhaps the relation between food and health. This emphasises the status of health and nutrition in Nordic Food research, which is strongly embedded in the political program of *New Nordic Food* and concretised by the *New Nordic Kitchen*, based on what Barjolle and Sylvander (2000) called “Northern European quality values” such as animal welfare, organic production, pure/clean food, sustainable production, hygiene, and distribution, (see introduction in this issue). In his article, Mark Emil Tholstrup Hermansen examines the contemporary food discourse of the *New Nordic Kitchen* which is considered a way for Nordic identity to be expressed in close relationship to representations about the Nordic landscape. The *New Nordic Kitchen* is a discursive foundation for the imagined community of the Nordic folk. Yet, in connection with the articles of Hegnes, Skuland & Ånestad, and Koustrup & al. one can argue that a Nordic food identity expressed as a special Nordic taste connected to the landscape, local communities, and historical roots does not occur in Nordic peoples’ everyday life. Instead, it is represented by substantial cultural work undertaken by gourmet food writers, chefs, and some food researchers, which texts and writings are serving as indicators, markers or even as starter plugs? Moreover, as Holm et al. argue, eating away from home, in restaurants or visiting friends, was not very common 15 years ago. Compared to France, the UK, and USA Nordic people, and especially Norwegians and Danes, eat far fewer meals outside home (Warde & al., 2007, Amilien 2003). But perhaps the objective of Noma (the famous Nordic Kitchen restaurant in Copenhagen, which is the subject of the second part of this conclusion) is not yet to become part of everyday food culture? Only the future will reveal if Noma’s construction of a Nordic identity with regards to food and cuisine will be shared by the Nordic folk in their everyday lives...
- 16 Looking back to our introduction (first text of the scientific part of this issue, where we assumed that food culture is a) a set of values that are continually evolving, b) that members of a society are especially aware of these values, c) that people build their identities around them, and d) that those values are expressed in words and language), we should obviously make a distinction between local or national characteristics and the common features of Nordic food cultures. While the set of values connected to food is both constantly influenced by individuals and their life stories and closely linked to tradition and local or national identities, there is a common Nordic discourse on food, conventionally linked to health and nutrition and recently

connected to taste, culinary culture and *terroir*. On the one hand, this public discourse is not specifically Nordic but globalised, as it is also developing in Eastern Europe or North America for example. But on the other hand we should also ask if there is a special connection and interactivity between public discourses and everyday life practices that can be specified as “Nordic: In other words does the *New Nordic Kitchen* reflects a Nordic food culture?”

“Sponsoring” the menu

- 17 The aim of this special issue of *AoFood* was to explore, to discuss, and to better understand the concept and the framework of Nordic Food Culture. The articles in this issue actually reflect a certain Nordic “food research reality”, indicating a particular frame of thoughts: subjects addressing health concerns or agricultural policy issues get funding through different ministries or policy programs, often in co-operation with food industry. But, as underlined by the last *AoFood* call for papers about “Research Funding in Human and Social Food Sciences: Debates, Constraints, Limits and Lessons”¹, some subjects have more difficulty getting support than others. One of the most popular Nordic food discourses of our time builds on the *New Nordic Kitchen*, even if its mentality is very far from the average Nordic eater.

What do we serve next? New Nordic Kitchen and Nordic Food Culture

- 18 In their short texts, on Nordic Food Lab and agriculture in Greenland, respectively, Mark Emil Tholstrup Hermansen and Anders Holst Markussen, show the precious nature of the Nordic products coming from a unique natural context and the importance of the education of the eaters in the *New Nordic Kitchen* program. *New Nordic Kitchen* definitively builds on a Southern European food mentality and its grammar of food (where values like origin, season, and quality are at its core), but uniquely combined with a Nordic approach of equality, purity, hygiene, welfare (of producers and animals), and self-control. Originally supported by different organisations, such as the Nordic Innovation Centre (NICe), *New Nordic Kitchen* can be considered as a political and commercial project that has been a major pillar in the development of a reformed Nordic food culture. It led to the implementation of concrete material institutions, such as the Meal Houses (*Måltidshus* are meeting places for “food issues” gathering food stake holders) or the Food Malls (modern, or modernised, food markets to be found in major cities) in the different Nordic countries where business and political interests are obviously embedded in each other: Although national and local actors, and both public and private stake holders play a major role, we see a systematic implementation of “food places” (including Meal houses and modern food markets) in Nordic countries, also concretised by conferences and workshops about Nordic food². One of the last NICe project’s is a virtual *Nordic Food House*³ while *New Nordic Kitchen* also led to the development of more immaterial values like taste, typicality, origin or *terroir* (as shown by Hegnes, Skuland & Ånestad, or Tholstrup Hermansen’s articles, or interviews of Tobias Nygren and Josh Evans in this issue). Either “In search of lost culinary heritage” or in implementation of a new food mentality, the *New Nordic Kitchen* has obviously a major impact on Nordic food research and Nordic food culture(s) today. This Nordic culinary stream, internationally renowned and recognised, builds on what Anders Holst Markussen calls “an organized wilderness”. The second part of this conclusion is hence a story about “taste hunting”, through a presentation of the Danish/ Nordic restaurant Noma illustrated by the words of one of his famous chef, René Redzepi .

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Notes

- 1 See <http://aof.revues.org/6909> - Contact the editor if you are interested in the topic
- 2 Often supported by the Nordic Innovation Center (NICe), as the first “Nordic terroir workshop”- URL: <http://www.nofima.no/en/kurs/2009/02/1681926067816039086>
- 3 http://nynordiskmad.org/fileadmin/webmasterfiles/PDF/Foerslag_till_Strategi_090920.pdf

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Abstracts

This paper is concluding our special issue by emphasizing the main results and the golden thread from the different articles which cover fields of interests as various as health, nutrition, obesity, hygiene, place of origin, “terroir”, and the New Nordic Kitchen. Characterized by “traditional Nordic” food topics (such as nutrition and health) on the one hand and “new Nordic” food subjects (linked to origin and taste) on the other hand, this issue could be considered as an illustration of the current Nordic food cultural awareness, combining “healthy” food and body image with quality and taste. The authors also emphasize the importance of public discourses and the role of “words” in the recognition of the cultural value of food, where the New Nordic Kitchen seems to play a central role.

Instantanés et portraits, première partie - Culture(s) de l'alimentation nordique(s): bouchées festives en guise de conclusion

Cet article conclut ce numéro spécial sur la/ les culture(s) de l'alimentation nordique(s) en mettant l'accent sur les résultats et le fil d'Ariane qui se dégagent des différents articles aux sujets aussi variés que la santé, la nutrition, l'obésité, l'hygiène, l'origine, le terroir ou la Nouvelle Cuisine Nordique. Se caractérisant par un dualisme entre, d'une part, des thèmes traditionnellement liés à l'alimentation dans les pays nordiques (comme la santé ou la nutrition) et d'autre part, des thèmes «nouveaux» (comme l'origine des produits ou le goût), ce numéro spécial pourrait être considéré comme une illustration de la culture de l'alimentation nordique actuelle, combinant alimentation saine et image du corps avec qualité et goût. Les auteurs insistent aussi sur l'importance des discours publics et sur le rôle des « mots » dans la reconnaissance de la valeur culturelle de l'alimentation, dans laquelle la Nouvelle Cuisine Nordique semble jouer un rôle central.

Index terms

Mots-clés : culture de l'alimentation, alimentation saine, nutrition, Nouvelle Cuisine Nordique

Keywords : food culture, culture of food, food nutrition, healthy food, New Nordic Kitchen