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Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage

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ASHGATE

Chapter 1

Re-Inventing a Tradition of Invention: Entrepreneurialism as Heritage in American Artisan Cheesemaking

Heather Paxson

In his 2006 book, *The United States of Arugula*, David Kamp credits Laura Chenel with almost singlehandedly introducing goat cheese to America by becoming its first domestic commercial producer (2006: 171–2). Chenel's story, in his telling, contains two iconic features. First, to perfect her craft, Chenel traveled to France, the quintessentially cultured epicenter of "real" cheese. Second, she got her commercial break in 1980 when she drove a batch of fresh cheeses from her Sonoma County goat farm to Berkeley and walked into Chez Panisse restaurant. Alice Waters put the chèvre in a salad, named Chenel on the menu, and the rest is … invented tradition? Today the story of Laura Chenel's chèvre is often told to establish the beginning of a current "renaissance" in American artisan cheesemaking. A handful of Americans involved in the back-to-the-land movement, including Chenel, began making cheese by hand for commercial sale in the early 1980s; since 2000, the number of domestic artisan producers has more than doubled. The heroine of the chèvre's story embodies characteristics that could describe the American artisan industry as a whole: it is innovative, it is entrepreneurial and it borrows unapologetically from European tastes and savoir-faire.

Drawing on several years of ethnographic research among artisan cheesemakers, retailers and boosters in the United States, I suggest that a tradition of artisanal cheesemaking—a tradition that is consciously cultivated as newly emergent—locates its distinctively American heritage neither in the taste of a food nor in customary practice of cheese fabrication, but instead in an entrepreneurial sensibility. At talks given at annual meetings of the American Cheese Society and in a raft of recent popular cheese books, American artisanal cheesemaking is collectively characterized by shared cultural commitment to *innovation* as a source of value and integrity—even artisanal authenticity. What makes an American cheese distinctively American (in this formulation) is that it presents itself as new, different, unique—despite the fact that, as acknowledged in Laura Chenel's story of pilgrimage to France, it remains inescapably indebted to European histories of practice and taste-making. Often obscured in this formulation is how today's innovators are also indebted to American histories of

practice and taste-making that have unfolded in New England, Wisconsin, central California, and elsewhere across the States (Paxson 2010).

To frame my argument about American invented traditions of artisanal cheesemaking innovation, I will first briefly characterize the foil against which claims to American exceptionalism are made: namely, invented traditions of European continuity. Just as the appearance of continuity in European food traditions relies on changing methods of fabrication and marketing, I will demonstrate through the example of the oldest continuously operating artisan cheese factory in the United States how an emphasis on change relies on continuity "in order to demonstrate its effect" (Strathern 1992: 3).

French Cheese and the Invention of Tradition

In the course of my research among American cheesemakers, I lost count of how many times I heard repeated General Charles De Gaulle's complaint, "How can you govern a country which has 246 varieties of cheese?" (Mignon 1962) (The number of cheeses changed with each recitation.) De Gaulle's quip tells us something about the role of food, and of cheese in particular, in helping to establish a collective sense of regional affiliation. Cheese, an ancient, domestic means of preserving that most perishable agrarian product, milk, would seem ready-made to embody cultural heritage. De Gaulle's 246 (or so) varieties of cheese work as a symbol of national unruliness only if we imagine each of those cheeses as emerging from a politically entrenched patchwork of customarily distinct regions. De Gaulle's task was to unify a people loyally committed not to the excellence of "French" cheese but to 246 regionally distinctive cheeses and the cultural heritage for which they stand.

One of France's most elaborate and successful cheese traditions concerns Camembert, said to have originated when a Norman farmwoman named Marie Harel followed a "secret" recipe for Brie using a smaller Livarot mold (practicing the sort of improvisational tinkering I have found among American cheesemakers) and trained her children and grandchildren to carry on making the cheese as family patrimony. As Pierre Boisard (2003) details in *Camembert: A National Myth*, the cheese's story begins to transcend Norman regionalism and to take on the significance of a national myth because the tale is set in the early years of the French Revolution (1791) and because the secret Brie recipe is said to have been given to Madame Harel by a priest (who stands in the story as a representative of the *Ancien Régime*) seeking refuge with the Harel family while fleeing persecution by the revolutionaries. Thanks to Madame Harel's entrepreneurial industry, writes Boisard, "a bit of old France, of pre-Revolutionary France, will survive" into the future in a new form (2003: 10).

The myth of Camembert fits neatly Eric Hobsbawm's formula for "invented traditions," which he describes as "responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition" (1983: 2). No surprise, then, to learn that Marie Harel's mythological fame does not, in fact, date back to the Revolution. Instead, 130 years went by before the American Joseph Knirim turned up in the town of Camembert (pop. 300) to venerate the memory of Madame Harel and her "veritable Norman Camembert" by erecting a statue in her honor. Knirim, a physician, adulated Marie Harel's cheese not for its taste and sumptuousness, but for its "digestibility." In a letter to the townspeople of Camembert, Knirim explained: "Years ago, I suffered for several months from indigestion, and Camembert was practically the sole nourishment that my stomach and intestines were able to tolerate. Since then, I have sung the praises of Camembert, I have introduced it to thousands of gourmets, and I myself eat it two or three times a day" (Boisard 2003: 3). Only once the visiting American had erected her statue did Marie Harel's name begin to stand for the essential contribution that peasant agriculture has made to the strength of the French nation. Camembert's iconic Frenchness seems little tarnished by having become one of the nation's most industrialized cheeses. Long seeded with laboratory-isolated strains of *Penicillium candidum* to produce a pure-white coat of mold, and now most often made from pasteurized milk, Camembert's materiality today is only a shadow of what once cured Knirim's indigestion. In hopes of recuperating at least a hint of that past, Norman dairy farmers and cheesemakers have secured *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* (A.O.C.) status not for Camembert per se, but for Camembert de Normandie. For a cheese to qualify for the site-specific name, production must occur within geographically limited areas and comply with a voluminous set of regulatory standards (Rogers 2008). Norman Camembert and French Camembert now vie for consumer sentiment and market position. Throughout Europe, what heritage food will look like in the future is a contentious matter of politics and policy to be worked out through the legal instruments of geographical indications (on cheese, see: Boisard 1991, 2003, Grasseni 2003, 2009, Rogers 2008, on wine, see Ulin 2002, Guy 2003, Demossier 2011).

Such well-cultured cheeses as Camembert, Comté, and Taleggio are usefully analyzed as embodying and reproducing the "invented traditions" of country idylls populated by an immemorial peasantry (Boisard 2003, Rogers 2008, Trubek and Bowen 2008, Grasseni 2009). When a new wave of American cheesemakers travels to France to learn how to make "real" cheese, they reinforce European inventions of culinary tradition as authentic and gastronomically superior. Without doubt, many excellent cheeses are made in France and throughout Europe—but so, too, are boring supermarket cheeses. It is a testament to the success of France's invented cheese traditions and to the branding of French cheeses as fundamentally authentic and traditional—even when most Camembert today is, in fact, made from pasteurized milk and ladled by robots—that foil-wrapped, processed wedges of Laughing Cow (*La Vache Qui'rit*, in its native tongue) are never metonymically dubbed "French cheese" (Boisard 1991). As Hobsbawm writes, "It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes the

'invention of tradition' so interesting for historians of the past two centuries" (1983: 2). In Europe, where "the traditional" and "the modern" continue to be potent, mutually constitutive tropes through which people stake moral claims of belonging, authenticity, and progress, "invention of tradition" is a particularly useful analytic (cf. Terrio 2000). But in the United States, where progress is valued over patrimony, what is invented as tradition—what is enshrined as a matter of cultural heritage—is continual change and innovation, not continuity. In the United States, continuity in practice, in know-how, in form, risks being labeled old-fashioned or, worse, boring, and so continuity is often obscured in narratives of innovation. Americans, ever impatient for a brighter tomorrow, are continuously remaking and marketing their traditions as new, fresh, and exciting.

American Cheese and a (Continuously Re-invented) Tradition of Invention

In 1865, with Lincoln in the White House and the Civil War just coming to an end, the Marin French Cheese Company began making cheese (originally the Thompson Brothers Cheese Co.) after Jefferson Thompson, a dairy farmer, recognized an emergent market niche in the port town of San Francisco. Compare to the above story of Camembert that of Marin French, the oldest continuously operating cheese factory in the United States, located in Petaluma, California. In a 2008 interview, the late Jim Boyce, who in 1998 purchased the company from Thompson's descendents, told me the story as he learned it from an employee who had just retired after 60 years with the company.

During the California Gold Rush (1849–1855), the story goes, European stevedores (deckhands) who sailed into Yerba Buena harbor (later, San Francisco Bay) delivering goods to support the mining enterprises got "caught up in the fever" and abandoned ship to seek their own fortune in the mines. After the gold rush went bust, workers returned to the bay to make a living at the dockyards. Boyce said to me:

> Now, in any workman's bar or inn … you work hard, you get dehydrated, you go to the bar for hydration and energy—most typically that's given to you by beer so you can quickly restabilize yourself. … The beer gives them hydration and carbohydrate but no protein. And most typically in a workman's bar there's a jar of pickled eggs or something like that, pig knuckles, sausage. [But here] there weren't any eggs; no chickens— nothing had been developed. … Well, Jefferson Thompson, the dairyman on this farm [the site of the present-day factory] says to himself in a moment of marketing brilliance, 'I wonder if they'd eat cheese, instead?' So he starts making these little cheeses, three-ounce cheeses, more or less. And he hauls them off to the docks, and they put them on the table in a bowl, and they were an immediate hit! Why? Because these are European stevedores: they knew cheese. They ate it breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And that was the origin of the company.

Whereas Europe's invented food traditions mean to legitimate present practices by claiming continuity with the past (even if shaped in a new form), American origin stories mark decisive breaks with the past. The story of Laura Chenel chèvre exemplifies individual passion and entrepreneurial opportunism; Marin French's Breakfast Cheese celebrates the creation of new markets.

A tradition of invention is enshrined in the American Cheese Society (ACS) designation of American Originals as a classificatory category for its annual judging and competition. American Originals designate cheeses invented on American soil: Colby and Brick, invented by first-generation immigrants in nineteenth-century Wisconsin; Teleme and Jack, invented in twentieth-century California. In recent years, the American Cheese Society has added "original recipe" subcategories of American Originals; 2011 award winners included Mt. Tam, Cocoa Cardona and Flagsheep. The theme of the 22nd Annual Meeting of the ACS held in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2005—*Creating Tradition*—did not so much offer a self-conscious look at how American cheese traditions had been invented as it set out to create tradition anew from this point onward, into the future. The call for Americans to create a cheesemaking tradition arises from a feeling among newer artisans, those getting their start since Laura Chenel's goat cheese hit Berkeley, that they have been largely on their own, starting from scratch.

Allison Hooper, co-founder of the 25-year-old Vermont Butter & Cheese Company, writes in her Foreword to Roberts' *Atlas of American Artisan Cheese*, "Without the burden of tradition we are free to be innovative, take risks," suggesting that a lack of tradition in regional cheese types and fabrication method is a virtue rather than a deficit because it opens up possibilities for experimentation (2007: xiii). Dancing Cow's Sarabande, a cow's milk cheese with a washed rind, is molded in a truncated pyramid form, the kind used in France for Valençay, a charcoal-dusted goat's milk cheese from the province of Berry (legend has it that the cheese was once a made in a perfect pyramid until Napoleon, passing through Valençay town following a failed military campaign in Egypt, was so enraged by the cheese's taunting shape that he lopped off the top with his sword, leaving the form that survives today). In a presentation at the 2007 American Cheese Society meetings, Steve Getz, co-owner and operator of Dancing Cow (which has since gone out of business), delighted in announcing that it had been recently declared illegal in France to make a cow's milk cheese in a truncated pyramid form (the shape is reserved for goat's milk cheese).[1] At an ACS panel the following year devoted to "European Forebears: Reinventing the Classics," Flavio DeCastilhos, who started a farmstead cheese operation after leaving a successful Internet start-up, described the reaction of a Dutch cheesemaking consultant he brought to Oregon to develop a line of Gouda-style cheeses for his Tumalo Farms:

1 Chapter 5, Article 2 of France's "Decree no. 2007-628 relating to cheeses and specialty cheese houses" (April 27, 2007) stipulates that "pyramid and truncated pyramid" forms are "reserved exclusively for goat's milk cheeses."

> I had this really interesting idea that I wanted to make this cheese— I want to have this hoppy flavor, I want to put beer in it. So [he] turns to me and says, 'I can't help you.' I said, 'Why not?'
> 'Well, in Holland, we drink the darn beer. You're on your own.'
> So I had to go and figure it out myself. But that's how the Pondhopper was born.[2]

Cheesemakers develop original product lines by tinkering with established recipes and bestowing novel names on resulting cheeses: use goat's milk rather than cow's in a Gouda recipe, wash it with a local microbrew beer, and call the cheese Pondhopper; or, start with a Havarti recipe but blend sheep and cow's milk to come up with Timberdoodle (on naming cheeses, see West et al. 2012). Such cheeses exemplify how American artisans, unconstrained by expectations for fidelity to customary form, seek to redefine "American cheese" by creating a tradition of invention.

Despite persistent claims to novelty, my point is that this sentiment and practice has a history. In our interview, Jim Boyce explicitly likened the present era to that of turn of the twentieth century in terms of patterns of cheese consumption as well as artisan modes of production. The early 1890s, he explained, saw a flourishing of cheesemaking activity not only in New England and the upper Midwest, but also in port cities up and down the Pacific coast; among the more successful was Tillamook, which first opened in Oregon in 1894. A similar flourishing of cheesemaking enterprises began again in the 1990s: two years after its founding in 2006 the Oregon Cheese Guild boasted 13 members, including Tillamook. Both eras, Boyce said, have been periods "of innovation in local cheese."

Marin French, Boyce told me, "survived wars, it survived depressions, it survived dot coms, it survived what I call the Cheese Depression, which was in the early eighties—it was discovered that cheese had fat and … if you had fat in your food, it was no good." Marin French's success has been made possible by the strong cheese market of San Francisco, but that market has had to be marketed *to*. Innovation is not to be romantically imagined as a craftsperson's singular artistic creativity. Successful entrepreneurial innovation responds to customer tastes that transform alongside demographic shifts (immigration, urbanization, class mobility) and broader culinary trends. As Howard Becker points out, craft's defining utility implies that its objects and activities must be useful to *others:* "If a person defines his work as done to meet someone else's practical needs, then function, defined externally to the intrinsic character of the work, is an important ideological and aesthetic consideration" (1978: 864). Consumer desire helps to constitute craft not only by providing necessary markets, but also through informing aesthetic standards.

Having got its start selling small rounds of "Breakfast Cheese" to European deckhands to accompany their morning ale, by the turn of the twentieth century

2 25th Annual meeting of the American Cheese Society, Chicago, Illinois, July 25, 2008.

Marin French had introduced an Austrian-style, smear-ripened cheese called Schloss. In the early 1900s they launched Thompson Brothers Camembert: hand-molded Camembert was produced in Marin County prior to the Great San Francisco earthquake. In 1907, one year after the earthquake, Thompson renamed the Camembert "Yellow Buck." Boyce speculated that Yellow Buck was named after the buck elk that were at one time plentiful in the area and that are now being reintroduced in a sanctuary on Point Reyes peninsula. At the same time, Yellow Buck is "a symbol of strength" that Boyce interpreted as speaking to the rugged beauty of the Marin landscape, as well as being "sort of masculine." A company that got its start selling cheese in saloons seems consciously to have worked to sustain a masculine image in marketing its cheese with male as well as female consumers in mind. Masculine appeal, like any other culturally meaningful symbolic marker, is not a static quality. The Yellow Buck label was retired in the teens or twenties and replaced by the regal, Frenchified brand name, Rouge et Noir. The entrepreneurial spirit in evidence in today's artisan "renaissance" is part of and indebted to a longstanding tradition of innovation. I have argued, moreover, that the American pioneering ideal has contributed to a collective neglect of an ongoing history of artisan cheesemaking, one long characterized by innovation in marketing as well as craft method (Paxson 2010).

Getting product to market at a viable price is essential to any commercial enterprise. Describing to me how the Thompson brothers once transported fresh cheeses by horse and wagon to the Petaluma River and then by steamer across the Bay, Jim Boyce offered this analysis:

> … it's putting a product together with a very receptive group of people who understood and could enjoy the product. It's pure marketing— it's marketing at its greatest! It's the individual who's saying, 'What if?' … I also think that it is part of the foundation of why today San Francisco is the strongest cheese market in the country. I think you can take its roots right back to the day cheese was delivered to the docks of San Francisco, to the workers.

By locating the authenticity of a food in its history of "pure marketing," Boyce offered a savvy cultural analysis. In her Master's thesis, "Chore, Craft and Business: Cheesemaking in 18th Century Massachusetts," Kristina Nies describes how eighteenth-century cheesemakers "made adjustments for seasonal fluctuations as well as for the marketplace" (2008: 10). She writes of one Massachusetts farmwoman, Elizabeth Porter Phelps, who innovated a recipe for full-fat cheese after her husband, who marketed the cheese in Boston, reported that it would command a higher price than the usual skimmed-milk cheese (Nies 2008: 10). Deborah Valenze writes similarly of eighteenth-century English dairywomen, "Long accustomed to selling their products, if only on a local basis, they showed considerable sensitivity to the ever-elusive predilections of the market" (1991: 154). In the early 1800s, Phelps, like Thompson a hundred years later—and

like Swiss immigrant John Jossi, who developed Brick cheese for German settlers in 1870s Wisconsin—was a cheese innovator driven by commercial possibility.

Jim Boyce did not innovate in the vat; his entrepreneurial creativity was expressed through marketing. Boyce, who reintroduced the Yellow Buck label in 2000 to commemorate [roughly] the Camembert's 100-year anniversary, took over the company amidst a financial slump. To turn things around, not only did he diversify the product line by introducing blue-veined and flavored varieties as well as goat's milk cheeses, he revised the company's marketing strategy. When he acquired the company, Marin French was producing Brie and Camembert in small batches from hand-cut curd, manually bucketed, aged, and individually wrapped by hand—and it was all sold in the deli dairy. As Jim Boyce schooled me, commercial dairy products are sold in supermarkets as either deli dairy or service deli. Deli dairy refers to the large refrigerated cases along the back walls of supermarkets that contain perishable staples: butter, milk, yogurt, and blocks of "everyday" cheese, encased in plastic. Today, while Marin French still owns supermarket shelf space in regional stores, most of its product is now directed to the service dairy and displayed as a specialty item in a center island, perhaps, rather than as a staple food alongside milk and butter. Boyce began to market the cheese in a way that calls attention to its method of fabrication, bestowing the cultural cache of "artisanal" on a label that has been around for over a hundred years but must now be "discovered" by an emergent, discriminating cheese world. Cristina Grasseni writes of Italian cheesemakers trying to capitalize on consumer interest in heritage foods, "the commercialization of cheese as a traditional product entail[s] not only a transformation of traditional skills but also the acquisition of new skills for managing one's image" (2003: 260; see also Terrio 1999). What Grasseni calls "packaging skills" are, in Italy, hidden behind appeal to heritage, but in the U.S., they are as likely to be announced as evidence of authentic entrepreneurial acumen.

Conclusion

In suggesting that in the United States artisanal cheese is better characterized in terms of a "tradition of invention" (albeit invented as such) in contrast to the "invention of tradition," I have meant to point out the cultural influence of the American celebration of entrepreneurial innovation on craft industry and food heritage. While Europe's traditions may not be as old as some imagine, so too may America's inventions not be so innovative. American cheesemakers may not feel burdened by the bureaucratic constraints of Europe's government-protected "traditional" recipes, but when they dream up new cheeses they inevitably modify old ones. As Marquis and Haskell write in *The Cheese Book*, "the story of cheesemaking is a long history of imitation, ever since the first cheeses were made" (1964: 18). A Wisconsin cheesemaker who recently started adding value to his German-American wife's family's 160-year-old dairy farm by making Italian-style cheeses, acknowledged to me in an interview that "the technical part of making cheese ... we're grabbing, stealing, borrowing" from European models. Tumalo Farms' Pondhopper, on this view, is not so much an American Original as fancy Gouda. When newness is imagined as the source of a good's value, people can end up reinventing wheels of cheese.

If we view food heritage as a set of socially reproduced standards of taste as well as practical know-how, it is quite possible to trace continuity as well as change in American cheesemaking. "American" taste has always reflected the backgrounds of immigrant communities who have brought with them culinary preferences as well as dairying and cheesemaking skills (not to mention livestock), more recently from Latin America and previously from Europe: the Dutch in New York; Germans in Pennsylvania and later Wisconsin; English in New England. Such regional variation, Nies observes (2008: 35), might help explain the disputes over proper cheesemaking procedure evidenced in texts published in the 1790s in which authors disagree over the propriety of coloring cheddar-style cheese orange with the annatto seed. Still today, orange cheddar remains standard in Wisconsin and disdained in New England and New York, suggesting a kind of regional place-based heritage for at least this English-American variety of cheese. When the new artisan entrepreneurs wanting to make a mark with their singular creations overlook this *as* cheese heritage, they do so to establish their own artisanal authenticity as innovative and thus properly American.

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Chapter 2

Terroir in D.C.? Inventing Food Traditions for the Nation's Capital

Warren Belasco

When, in the exuberant early days of the Obama presidency, Michelle Obama planted her vegetable garden on the White House lawn and sponsored a new farmer's market nearby, it seemed that the local food movement had come to official Washington. Even before his inauguration the President-Elect had made a pilgrimage to Ben's Chili Bowl, a down-home hot dog stand known mainly to its indigenous black residents, and this too prompted speculation that the Federal City's food resources might finally be receiving some respect. Might D.C., a city historically oblivious, if not overtly hostile to its own roots, culture, and environment, have its own *terroir*?

The question was not frivolous, for as Amy Trubek argues in *The Taste of Place* (2008), the possibilities for and implications of *terroir* extend far beyond its origins as an assertion of French culinary superiority—a hegemonic claim familiar to status-conscious Americans, especially in Francophile official Washington (Landau 2007, Haley 2011, Strauss 2011). But when broadened to mean a pride in place—*any* place—*terroir* takes on a more functional meaning that transcends the invidious distinctions of the culinary authenticity game. Rather than establishing hierarchies of taste, the newer, democratized *terroir* fosters the three Rs: *regard* for one's native landscape, *reciprocity* between food producers and consumers, and an overall sense of *responsibility* for the consequences of one's own behavior. In short, as the theory goes, pride in place becomes an instrument of local environmental, economic, and cultural regeneration (Russo 2009). And if this could happen in the nation's capital, long the test case for social reform, it would bolster the local foods trend everywhere.

Establishing a sense of *terroir* in the nation's political capital was no easy feat, however. There is a difference between living in a place and loving that place. Even the more democratized, functional *terroir* needs a positive reputation as a base. Unlike other American culinary powerhouses such as New Orleans, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, however, Washington did not have a wealth of native pride to draw upon. On the contrary, the Federal City was established in the 1790s to be distinctly national, modern, and placeless, a neutral site to which jealous, competing states could send representatives without fear of being overwhelmed by local interests and diversions (Young 1966). Carved out of the declining tobacco and wheat farms of Maryland and Virginia, and plagued from the start by