

## Chapter 3

### When Carrots Become Posh: Untangling the Relationship Between 'Heritage' Foods and Social Distinction

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#### Abstract

There has been a growing discourse of 'heritage' foods over the past decade. It is a discourse that incorporates rarebreed meats, traditional cheeses, vegetables and fruit. Rejected by mainstream industrial production, they food that are framed as highly endangered. We are urged to buy, grow and eat these treasures of human civilisation or lose them forever. As with other kinds of 'alternative' food, enthusiasts claim they represent a means to resist corporate dominance of the food system – in the words of a Reclaim the Fields poster, they might help us 'beet the system'. But there is an increasingly uncomfortable tension between these 'alternative' claims, and the sight of so many heritage products for sale in supermarkets and in upmarket restaurants and gastro-pubs, not to mention their prominence in the lifestyle sections of broadsheet newspapers aimed squarely at a well-off, middle class audience. What makes heritage foods 'posh' and does it matter? This chapter teases out the ways that heritage foods reproduce social distinction. It argues that they do so not only due to being 'co-opted' by businesses (a kind of 'heritage patina' in the tradition of greenwashing), but in ways that are intrinsic to the project of heritage consumption itself.

## **Tensions within heritage food politics**

In February 2015 the *Independent* reported that the demand for heritage vegetables was soaring: “the ultimate antidote to tasteless, mass-produced fruit and veg forced in a vast greenhouse complex to fill supermarket shelves and the pockets of multinational corporations” (Johnston, 2015). The article was illustrated by a picture of “one of the most popular dishes at London's Portland Restaurant [...] almost entirely made of heritage carrots”. It shows a clump of small, whiskery carrot roots, poking upright out of a circle of sauce, a style of presentation sometimes called ‘cheffy’ and a marker of fine dining. Carrots grow easily in the British climate and, like cabbage and cauliflower, are an old-fashioned and normally unglamorous stalwart of British cuisine. What is it about heritage that can boost this orange root to the status of gourmet delicacy? In the same article Rob Smith, just crowned winner of the BBC TV competition series *Big Allotment Challenge* and champion of heritage vegetables, voices a common claim that such vegetables offer a chance to reclaim lost flavours our forebears enjoyed:

‘I’m growing things my grandfather Albert used to grow. It tastes like the veg you used to have as a child,’ he said. ‘When you buy a carrot in a supermarket, you recognise it as a carrot but it tastes nothing like the thing you used to know. I wouldn’t really say there’s much comparison. Its flavour is much more powerful. It tastes 10 times stronger’.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Smith is now endorsing a heritage vegetable range in one of the UK’s popular seed catalogues, Dobies.

There is no single agreed definition of ‘heritage’ vegetables, but the term is, not surprisingly, applied to older varieties, and normally not to hybrids. Some heritage vegetables have been developed informally by farmers and gardeners saving seed, others are commercial varieties, long since dropped from catalogues in favour of more efficient crops. Rejected by mainstream industrial production, they are thus available for framing as heritage at risk. In response to their imminent extinction, consumers are urged to buy, grow or eat them and thereby play a part in safeguarding them for future

generations.

Existing outside mainstream agriculture also allow them to be cast in opposition to mainstream food production and to agri-tech and retail corporations, as can be seen in the *Independent* article above. Popular media texts draw attention to the mass production of non-heritage vegetables and associate heritage vegetables with grandparents and home vegetable plots. They associate non-heritage produce with profit, and heritage with care and carefulness. These different strands of heritage vegetable discourse come together to afford claims that growing and eating 'heritage' represents resistance to corporate dominance of the food system. In the words of a Reclaim the Fields poster, heritage vegetables might help us to "beet the system". There is therefore an uncomfortable tension between these politicised 'alternative' claims and the sight of so many heritage vegetables not only in allotments and home gardens but also as part of supermarket luxury ranges and in upmarket restaurants, not to mention their prominence in the lifestyle sections of broadsheet newspapers, aimed squarely at a well-off, middle class audience (Carolan, 2007; Jordan, 2007, 2015). As we say in Britain, they are a bit 'posh'.

'Posh' is a cosy, self-knowing kind of word. It's not really very posh to call things posh, and implies a slight mockery of the tastes and wealth of the upper classes. This self-consciousness finds its way into some media coverage of heritage vegetables. In a *Guardian* article 'Heritage and heirloom seeds: they really do taste better' (Darnell, 2008) the writer calls them "bespoke" vegetables and writes of an inflation in what is needed these days to impress one's friends and neighbours. To grow one's own vegetables is now not enough to turn heads, but growing heritage vegetables allows one to boast 'some purple peas, some white carrots and some yellow beetroot!' In the *Guardian's* sister paper the *Observer*, an article teasingly titled 'Darling I only eat vintage' admits:

There's a snobbery attached to it all, of course [...] During the cheese course, you could casually remark, paring knife in hand, that, 'This is an original variety of

pear grown for Louis XIV in the Potager du Roi garden at Versailles. Do try it with the Brie. Baron de Rothschild produces it from a single herd of Flamandes in the heart of Meaux ...' Someone may, of course, clock you on the head with a cardoon. But there is something serious afoot here. You can only really buy this age-old produce at farmers' markets. Or you can grow it from your own seeds, harvested via the internet. Thus, heritage and heirloom foods prove our credentials as non-supermarket shoppers. And, as any foodie will tell you, being caught in Tesco's on a Saturday morning is just marginally more embarrassing than being caught in a brothel with your pants down. (Spencer, 2006)

That gentle mockery of the way the middle classes use alternative food discourses for the purposes of social differentiation softens what remains a significant and growing problem of inequality in countries like the UK (Jackson, 2017).

What is it that makes heritage foods posh? Alternative food movements generally have been associated with economically privileged groups, yet there is no consensus on the relationship between privilege and alternative consumption. A key question for anyone interested in heritage foods' radical potential is whether their upmarket associations are simply that—an association, made by retailers keen to make a profit from yet another food fad, or whether there is something that runs deeper, something inherently and irredeemably socially divisive about the heritage food project. To better understand this, the chapter analyses the discourse of heritage vegetables with a focus on the various ways that social exclusivity has been conceptualised. Heritage discourse itself has often been implicated in the reinforcement and reproduction of elite power (Hall, 2005, p. 24; Hewison, 1987; Littler & Naidoo, 2005, p. 3) and I tackle this idea first. I then turn to concerns from the literature on alternative consumption about social exclusion through cost, before exploring the ways the politics of heritage vegetables play out through the cultivation of tastes.

Nothing simply *is* heritage, despite the tendency in heritage discourses to presuppose

the inevitable and timeless heritage-ness of heritage object. Heritage is a discursive practice, which brings into being certain things *as* heritage (L. Smith, 2006, p. 4). In this chapter, I use media texts as a source of evidence about how heritage food discourse constructs certain foods as heritage in particular ways. Using Bourdieu's ideas (1984, 1986) about cultural capital and the performance of social class through taste, I argue that explicit claims about the importance of heritage eating are what enable these foods to be 'posh' and at the same disguises the self-interest of heritage eaters and their strategies for social distinction. I suggest that the heritage food project is unfortunately socially divisive in ways that cannot be addressed through the framework of heritage itself. Given the prominence of heritage foods in the UK in recent years, it is surprising that in the popular media they have been taken at face value as 'a good thing'. Even in the academic literature, the assumption that food heritage is all to the good goes largely unchallenged.

### **'Heritage' foods as a consumer discourse**

Heritage food research has focused on the instrumental uses of heritage foods, seeing them as a key driver of tourism, and an important component of tourists' itineraries (Bessière & Tibère, 2013; Hodges, 2001; Sammels, 2016). Writers are not always concerned with unpicking the very concept of 'heritage' or asking questions about the power relations that heritage food discourse shapes or is shaped by. Of course there have been more critical approaches taken by some, for example by examining the relations developed through the commodification of ethnic and regional heritage in Mexico (Littaye, 2015, 2016) or how the concept of 'heritage' is established and asserted in places as varied as Japan (de St Maurice, 2016) and France (Teil & Barrey, 2011). Nonetheless, researchers have tended to prioritise a focus on production over consumption (Tregear, 2003, p. 92). In much of the scholarly research on the subject, the consumer is usually only seen from the perspective of the producers and regional development boards who seek to attract them. There has been little research into the domestic consumption of heritage foods, and specifically on the work heritage does

when it is enrolled in discourses of alternative consumption.

The context for food heritage in different parts of the world varies, as do definitions and requirements for official heritage status. Nonetheless, food heritage discourse globally has been dominated by a particular idea of food culture, value and tradition that Tregear (2003) calls 'roman' —one based on the geographical specificity and long continuity of production associated with Italian food traditions. It may also contain elements of the French idea of 'terroir' (Delfosse, 2011; Hodges, 2001), which has come to suggest a deep connection between the land and human culinary achievements. There are a small number of certification or listing schemes for heritage foodstuffs. For example, Slow Food maintains a database called the Ark of Taste, listing and promoting heritage foods; it also works with chefs and others to encourage their production and consumption (Slow Food, 2015). The European Union operates the certification schemes Protected Designation of Origin and Protected Geographical Indication, with the aim of protecting traditional regional specialities and boosting European competitiveness in food production (European Commission, 2017; Balogh, Békési, Gorton, Popp, & Lengyel, 2016). Those seeking such an official stamp of heritage status for a foodstuff need to provide evidence of a strong and exclusive connection to a place or a region (European Commission, 2017; Slow Food, 2015). Foods on Unesco's intangible cultural heritage list are likewise all tied to a geographical place.<sup>1</sup>

This is a problem for the UK, which by a 'roman' definition has lost most of its food heritage as a result of early and thorough industrialisation and the effects of rationing in the Second World War (Tregear, 2003, p. 103). With a dearth of foods recognisable as 'heritage' under the roman definition, British producers and trade organisations have reinvented heritage foods from historic sources, like Cornish Yarg cheese, made according to historic production methods. They have also heritagised products of the industrial age, like the soft drink Vimto and Harrogate toffee (Tregear, 2003, pp. 99-102).

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<sup>1</sup> The current list can be found at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists> (accessed 7/11/17)

These may lack an ancient connection to a people or their land, but can be claimed as both traditional and British.

British producers, consumers and retailers have also embraced the concept of heritage fruit. Britain once had a large number of commercial orchards, mainly in England (Natural England, 2011, p. 1). Many trees survive, though the majority of these orchards ceased commercial production in the second half of the 20th Century (Robertson & Wedge, 2008). There has been a great deal of interest in protecting and reviving 'heritage' apples, and to a lesser extent, other fruits like plums, but the apple remains significant as an iconic fruit specifically associated with Englishness (Jordan, 2015, pp. 98-101). Significantly, trees are literally rooted in a location and their longevity means many locally unique varieties survive, qualifying them for heritage status under even the criteria of geographical certification schemes.

The 'heritage' vegetables I began the chapter with have also grown from a niche interest to a mainstream phenomenon in the UK during the last decade, no doubt helped by their regular promotion in the lifestyle media. They have mainly been produced by home growers, with 'heritage' seeds exchanged and sold, but increasingly heritage vegetables are for sale in shops and restaurants. Unlike orchard heritage, British heritage vegetable discourse does not confine itself to 'native' varieties and celebrates Italian, French, American and Japanese squash, beans, tomatoes and beetroot in a large number of seed catalogues, lifestyle articles and supermarket produce ranges. It is no coincidence that these are all parts of the world with their own already developed heritage vegetable discourses. Slow Food is centred in Italy; Terre de Semences and Association Kokopelli have promoted traditional varieties in France. 'Heirloom' vegetables have been conserved and shared widely in the United States (see Carolan, 2007; Jordan, 2015), while in Japan, Kyoto's heirloom vegetables have been developed as a key component of Japanese culinary tradition (de St Maurice, 2016, p. 67).

The Heritage Seed Library, which collects and distributes heritage seed to paying members in the UK, restricts its collection to British varieties (Heritage Seed Library, 2012). But these tend not to be what agronomists would term 'landraces' — bred over a long time according to informal grower selection—but commercial catalogue types, dropped in the 20th Century. Their connection to geographical place is therefore a connection to crop breeding stations or seed companies. For example, the 2012 catalogue features Sutton Harbinger, bred by Sutton Seeds around 1901 and Avon Early beetroot, "one of a series of innovative breeding lines from the former National Vegetable Research Station at Wellesbourne" (Heritage Seed Library, 2012, pp. 10, 13). Like Vimto, this is a food heritage that refuses to be restricted by roman criteria. What, then, are the characteristics associated with heritage in Britain?

In North America and Australia the word most associated with the by now well-developed consumer discourses of traditional fruit and vegetables is 'heirloom', connoting a personal, family connection, the idea of something informally handed down from one generation to another (Heritage Seed Library, 2012). But in the UK the term most commonly used in consumer contexts remains 'heritage'. That word has a particular resonance in Britain, associated with the visiting of stately homes or the preservation of 'great works of art' —the public reverence of elite culture, one might say (Hall, 2005; L. Smith, 2006, p. 11; Wright, 1985). This symbolic relationship is further nurtured by the development of heritage kitchen gardens in many historic properties, where heritage varieties of fruit and vegetables are displayed in the grounds as an extension to the historic buildings, furniture and art works traditionally exhibited (Jordan, 2010; Wincott, 2015). Heritage industry critics have accused country house heritage tourism of selectivity in the pasts it portrays and of airbrushing differences of interest in order to present a palatable narrative for the visitor (Weiss, 2007, p. 416). Jordan (2010, p. 8), in her analysis of heritage kitchen gardens, finds, too, that they are selective in their "excessively pleasant landscapes that erase the difficulties of the very lives they seek to represent".

The sites of heritage food discourse are many and varied in the British context and the country house aesthetic is not ubiquitous. Across lifestyle media, menus and food packets, campaign posters and seed catalogues there is a great deal of variation but some common themes emerge. Heritage foods are generally characterised as diverse, colourful and better-flavoured. Meanwhile, non-heritage produce is described as bland, homogenised and offering little choice. The examples introduced above illustrate this, contrasting unusual colours and tastes that are “powerful” and “ten times stronger” with “tasteless, mass-produced fruit and veg”. While heritage vegetables are associated with amateurs and enthusiasts—often grandparents, as in the Rob Smith interview above—non-heritage food production and retail are portrayed as over-efficient and cynically profit-motivated (“to fill supermarket shelves and the pockets of multinational corporations”). Though they are a feature of modern tourism they play a larger and more significant role in domestic consumption in Britain, where they speak to wider responses to globalisation and anxieties about corporatised, intensive, anonymous and unaccountable food systems (Grasseni, 2011, para 2; Littler, 2009, p. 1). Yet the politics of these domestic consumer discourses of heritage food are not well understood.

Heritage foods have been mentioned in studies of other alternative consumption discourses. For example, Thomas (2008, p. 681) identifies 'heritage cookery' as a genre of lifestyle TV in her investigation of disaffection with consumerism in popular culture. Potter and Westall (2013, p. 164), in their critique of austerity chic in popular food culture, touch on the role of heritage labelled foods. These authors are critical of heritage as it is done—rolled up into a nostalgic vision of a utopian England that is white, upper middle class and male, and that appears inclusive and fun, but is deeply exclusionary. In other words, the problem is identified as a matter of the qualities of the heritage vision offered, rather than with heritage consumption per se. Similarly, Jordan (2015, pp. 127-128) notes that heirloom food texts target predominantly white and affluent audiences, and that tropical and Asian vegetables or heirloom collards and okra are rarely

mentioned “despite the centrality of these foods to soul food, Cajun, Gullah, and other cuisines”. This suggests that the category of heritage foods simply needs to expand, that being more inclusive can mitigate its exclusionary effects.

Jordan (2007, 2015) is the scholar who has consistently paid attention to the phenomenon of heritage vegetables in a consumer context. Her work has increased understanding of the development of the discourse, particularly in the US context. Her content analysis of newspaper coverage of heirloom tomatoes in the US finds a steep increase in coverage from the late 1990s to 2005 that corresponds with a change in emphasis in texts, from environmental themes to restaurant reviews and reference to heirloom vegetables as a marker of elite status (Jordan 2007, p. 34). Once more, Jordan identifies this issues as one extrinsic to the project of heritage foods, arguing that while heirloom tomatoes (as her key example) have become “status symbols” (2007, p. 36) and “an explicit badge of an elite lifestyle” (2015, p. 61) in some quarters, they remain available in home gardens, where “at least in high summer in a good year, they are plentiful and almost free”. She is right to say this means a wide constituency can not only enjoy these foods, but through their consumption take part in collective action to preserve biodiversity and change the food system (Jordan 2015, p. 71). However, it means she has not yet fully developed the problematic issues she raises in her work: the selectivity of the themes in the discourse as it is presented to different audiences, the selectivity of what qualifies as heritage (neglecting foods of non-white Americans) and the selective demographics of the spaces of heritage vegetable shopping and eating. They may be available free in some people’s back gardens, but still, what does it mean for them to be in upmarket restaurants? In other words, it is important to ask what work heritage vegetable discourse does to reproduce social class and race in certain sites. This is not undone simply by the parallel existence of these foods at other sites.

### **Heritage and elites**

The term ‘heritage’ comes with heavy class baggage, particularly in the British context,

where it remains closely connected to the country house experience. Indeed, the country house and estate are frequently alluded to in media texts about heritage products. For example, articles in the press that are ostensibly about the heritage fruit and vegetables, their taste and their role in combatting industrialisation of food, are often accompanied by photographs of locations are unmistakably grand—high, old brick walls around a vegetable plot, perhaps a glimpse of a stately home in the background. There are often signs of meticulous and expert care that only a team of professional gardeners can bring, with espaliered fruit trees, weed-free borders and neat brick paths (Wincott, 2017, p. 9).

A *Guardian* journalist delights in a restored Victorian walled garden in Sussex which boasts over a hundred varieties of heritage apple. The writer devotes a large part of the article to noting the “elegance” and order of the orchard, both of which imply paid labour. She writes about careful division of the garden, neatly clipped hedges around borders, and the way trees have been

coaxed into elegant forms, with traditional espalier, oblique cordons and fork-shaped palmette verriers against the red-brick wall, while others are trained as goblets and four-winged pyramids on free-standing metal frames. (Stares, 2016)

The aristocratic landowners and their staff seem to stand in for the English (or the British in this account), defending British identity and independence. In emphasising calm, timelessness and structure, the walled private estate comes to stand as a bulwark of resistance against a careless globalised commerce:

Commercial growers nowadays concentrate on a handful of cultivars selected for heavy cropping, bruise resistance, keeping quality and uniform shape; this garden, in contrast, celebrates our wealth of heirloom apples, whatever their peculiar traits. (Stares, 2016)

*The Telegraph* is similarly effusive about the heritage carrot’s priceless qualities in an article entitled ‘Return to Roots: Heritage Varieties of Carrot’ (Hart, 2011). Supermarkets

are said to like selling carrots, but for the wrong reasons: “because they can chop half a carrot into mini batons, stick them in a plastic container and charge you loads” for them. This is cheating the consumer twice-over, because not only will they be expensive, they will be an undistinguished, mass produced carrot:

Chances are, though, that your chopped-up carrot will be a common or garden variety, developed for bulk sales, rather than taste. What you want to get your hands on is a heritage carrot, one that harks back to the days when carrots came in all sorts of colours and configurations and actually tasted - in that peculiarly sweet and intense way that one remembers from childhood - of carrot. (Hart, 2011)

The article introduces some food heroes striving to educate the consumer and introduce them to the joys of heritage carrots. Renowned ‘posh’ supermarket Marks and Spencer is said to be selling a new range of heritage carrots, pulled from the ground and deposited in a silver bucket by someone who is likened to P. G. Wodehouse’s famous fictional butler, Jeeves. Two kinds of carrot are established in this narrative. One is “common”, grown and sold in bulk in undistinguished plastic wrapping, its colour a standard orange, produced with only a cynical regard for maximising profit. The other is the product of care—grown by small producers committed to producing the best quality vegetables, selected by chefs with their diners in mind. This carrot is classy, an idea hinted at by the silver bucket and the Jeevesian agronomist. Not churned out in bulk, it is a carrot you must try to “get your hands on”, but of course it rewards the discerning consumer with intense flavours otherwise lost to a golden age of the recent past.

Articles like these show a slight sense of unease with the poshness or exclusivity of heritage produce. As discussed above, there is often a tongue in cheek, ironic undertow. Describing an agronomist as Jeevesian is both patronising and slightly ridiculous, just like the dinner party host boasting of their aristocratic pears. The affordability and accessibility of heritage produce is often stressed, with tips on how to find seed and grow them yourself and promises that they are becoming available on supermarkets

shelves. This tension between distinction and popularisation is common to much lifestyle media where writers and those they interview for their articles take care to build a sense of the superiority of certain kinds of food, while at the same time sharing the secrets of distinction (Bell & Hollows, 2005, p. 11).

Heritage vegetable nostalgia is not all about the country house, however. It can often be far more down-to-earth and homely. In interviews and on his website, Rob Smith, discussed above, traces his passion for heritage produce to working on his grandfather's vegetable plot and the tastes he remembers as a child (Garden Organic, 2015; Johnston, 2015; R. Smith, 2016). Celebrity chef Raymond Blanc talks about labouring in his parents' vegetable garden as a child and of thrifty practices of storing roots in the cellar, and bottling and preserving produce (Gumming, 2013; James, 2015). This rather homely myth of 20th Century working class families who were poorer but ate better is echoed time and again in consumer-oriented heritage discourse. The secret of the vegetables they enjoyed and other thrifty tips for conserving and cooking them are shared so that consumers might reclaim lost pleasures, as in this *Guardian* article about 'Pig Row', a small-holding run according traditional methods:

As a child I remember finding my way into the larder of my great aunt's kitchen and seeing shelf after shelf of pickled beetroot and beans; a harvest festival in a terrace. For the first time in 70 years there will be 'Fat Lazy Blondes' on our kitchen table; this lettuce variety won't be found in the supermarket. The 'Manchester Turnip' is going to be in our first woolton pie. The seeds my great grandfather sowed and saved, seeds we all once saved and swapped over our back garden walls, aren't as readily available today. Over the last century we have lost 98% of vegetable varieties due to regulations. I would have sown 'Salford Black' runner beans but that's at death's door, and one pea variety, 'Champion of England', is extinct. (Oldham, 2013)

Reference to a terraced house, swapping seeds over the garden wall and making the wartime Woolton pie (a recipe for making do on wartime rations) all situate this

nostalgia in a humble household. It's perhaps worth noting too that the industrial-age heritage foods Harrogate toffee and Vimto, mentioned by Tregear (2003), are also rather homely treats, associated with day trips to the seaside. Vegetable heritage certainly has a rather cosy relationship with country house heritage, but texts mix and match many themes and reference points. 'Poshness' or luxury are often there, but they are not the only way in which heritage food discourse is instrumental in projects of social distinction.

### **The price of heritage**

Heritage food production processes are valued for being smaller, slower and less efficient. This is after all why they were dropped by mainstream production, and thus became available for characterisation as endangered heritage, but it inevitably raises prices. In Britain, heritage foods are found in gastro-pubs, pricy restaurants and posh cafés. They won't be found in the cheap and cheerful 'greasy spoon' cafés or fried chicken takeaways in the poorer parts of town. Though they are now found in mainstream British supermarkets, heritage products tend to be in luxury lines, like Sainsbury's Taste the Difference 'heritage jewels' and 'heritage Marmande' tomatoes and Tesco's Finest range Narragansett heritage turkey or heritage Natoora carrots, each on sale at the time of writing. Produce marketed this way is an indulgence or treat—for those who can afford it, of course. But in heritage food discourse, the idea of indulgence (better taste, novelty, something a bit special) is justified by the idea that such purchases are for the greater good.

The heritage discourse of the Slow Food Movement's Ark of Taste is a good example of this combination. Its UK website says the Ark is a catalogue of foods at "either imminent or potential risk of extinction." The project aims to

raise awareness and protect our food heritage, so that they may be rediscovered and returned to the market... By preserving these foods, creating a market and preserving them as part of the landscape, our long term objective is preserving Britain's edible biodiversity, and with this, its food security.

(Slow Food UK, 2015)

The BBC's Food Programme (BBC Radio 4, 1979-), is also a long term champion of non-industrial, local and endangered foods. It has featured the Ark of Food and its products on several occasions. In a 2015 programme, presenter Dan Saladino learns about the rare perry pears and the pear cider or 'perry' made from them in a particular region of England (BBC 2015). The pear varieties are said to have been close to extinction when a visionary farmer Tom Oliver rescued them and produced the traditional drink once more. Its commercial rebirth means there is now hope, says the presenter, but to survive it needs wider recognition. The programme ends with the words of Oliver: "It would be a real loss if perry were to disappear. It needs helping and supporting and championing." Producers, chefs and consumers are characterised as champions and heroes in stories like this. The ethical quality of heritage conservation-through-consumption justifies the treat of heritage novelty and flavour — heritage is both heroism and its reward. Not everyone gets to play the hero, though, either because they are charged with routine and low-cost provisioning of the family meals, not statement food or hobby food (Bell & Hollows, 2005, p. 8), or because they simply lack the income to participate in this form of politics (Littler, 2011, p. 34).

If alternative foods tend to begin as expensive statement purchases, they often become mainstream over time. Mainstreaming of organic and fair trade has been remarkably successful, making them no longer straightforwardly middle-class (Barnett, Littler, & Soper, 2005, p. 150). The presence of 'heritage' badged produce in British supermarkets suggests this is increasingly true for heritage foods. Where 'alternatives' find a large market and larger producers get involved, prices can come down and retailers can no longer be accused of pandering to a privileged group (Guthman, 2008a, p. 431, 2008b, p.

392; Lambert-Pennington & Hicks, 2016, p. 58, see also Chapter 1 in this collection). Of course, the involvement of big business that leads to mainstreaming may bring its own problems, including intensification and exploitation in the production of food – meaning the resistance to corporations and industrialisation assumed to go hand-in-hand with the protection and revival of traditional foods may be lost along the way (see Guthman, 2004, on the case of organic foods). There is a widespread suspicion of ‘co-optation’ where the capitalist marketplace transforms the symbols and practices of countercultural opposition into depoliticised commodities and fashion statements (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p. 136), resulting in what might be called a heritage patina, akin to corporate environmental ‘greenwashing’ (Budinsky & Bryant, 2013). Jordan (2015, p. 61) feels this is happening in the US to some degree, suggesting that agribusiness may charge a premium for unusual tomatoes or heritage turkeys and the label may as a result “become a relatively hollow marketing tool”.

These may well prove to be problematic issues with heritage foods as they become more commonplace, but they are again understood as problems of approach, rather than intrinsic problems with heritage discourse. If you take the claims made by champions of heritage produce at face value then mainstreaming is all to the good, bringing “almost-extinct crops... out of the history books and back into vegetable patches, gardens and orchards” (Briggs & Bardo, 2012). Thinking about the implications of mainstreaming reveals another, deeper problem with heritage foods and social distinction, one that arises from the counterposing of the mass-produced and the diverse that is at the heart of heritage vegetable discourse.

### **Heritage taste**

Some scholars worry that alternative food politics are overly individualised and inward-looking at the expense of the development of collective identities and of the grand projects that socialism and the Labour movement once concerned themselves with (e.g. Samuel, 1994, pp. 162-163). Yet much of the discourse of food heritage does refer to

exactly those large-scale social and economic problems—ownership of land and seed, the means to produce food, the dominance over the food system by a series of aggressive corporate giants, and the destruction of biodiversity and cultural diversity in the service of ever greater profits. Lifestyle media claims of a large and growing movement of individuals do not rely on formal membership or turnout at political events. They mainly rely on the evidence of a willingness of increasing numbers of people to buy and grow heritage foods. This is framed as a demand for change (Briggs & Bardo, 2012; Chittock, 2008; Wyke, 2011), a revolution (Low, 2008; Vidal, 2007) or a movement (Klein, 2008), much as it is in the literature of campaign groups. For example, Slow Food describes itself as “a global, grassroots movement with thousands of members around the world that links the pleasure of food with a commitment to community and the environment”.<sup>2</sup> Thus social movements and their organisations pursue an ideal of “individualised collective action” (Sebastiani, Montagnini, & Dalli, 2013, p. 476) or “collective strategies of consumption” (Carfagna et al., 2014, p. 158). In the case of the burgeoning heritage movement, this emerged through the development of a new taste—the taste for heritage—which did not exist before discourses of heritage consumption grew in the 1980s and 1990s (Jabs, 1984, p. v; Jordan, 2015, pp. 125-126).

Tastes are developed by individuals but are also largely shared, and relate to social class (Paddock, 2015; Potter & Westall, 2013). Taste both unites and separates (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56), but not as a matter of simple personal choice: it is classifying (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6) and heritage taste classifies in a number of ways. Firstly, emerging tastes do not only engage the taste buds, they also engage cultural capital. Knowledge about what makes a food ‘heritage’ and the value of that quality, as well as how it can be cooked and served, are required to eat heritage, and that cultural capital is displayed every time a consumer buys or serves it (Johnston & Baumann, 2007, p. 188). A taste for heritage means an acceptance and appreciation of vegetables in atypical colours and shapes such as white carrots or irregular shaped tomatoes, creviced and fluted on a farmer’s market stall

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.slowfood.org.uk/about/about/> (Accessed 7/11/17)

(Jordan, 2015, p. 30). Heritage taste might also mean learning to incorporate completely unfamiliar items into one's repertoire, such as the perry featured in the Food Programme (which was a regional drink, and has long been out of favour) or squash, a vegetable fairly new to British tables.

More intense flavour is not an inevitable quality of older kinds of food, and the taste of fruit and vegetables can be affected by many factors, such as rainfall, soil and temperature as well as genes (Kader, 2008). Nonetheless, intensity of flavour has become part of the myth of heritage foods' superiority. The revival of real ales since the 1970s has led to the phenomenon of super-bitter craft beers, particularly in the US and a general trend towards bitter food and drink, including bitter cocktails, kale and broccoli, and mature cheeses (Bryson, 2017; Taylor & Rohrer, 2017). Supposedly superior tastes imply a superior palate on the part of the consumer, someone who can appreciate complex and intense flavours and is not satisfied with the supposedly bland and easy tastes of mass-produced foods—something claimed in the lifestyle texts mentioned above about a burgeoning heritage food movement.

Developing such tastes and knowledge may bring pleasure to the individual and serve the greater good through heritage conservation or change in the food system, but it is also an investment in personal embodied cultural capital for those who are in a position to draw on and develop these resources (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 12, 1986, p. 47). This acquired set of tastes and positions with regards to food are what Carfagna et al. (2014, p. 158) have called an 'eco-habitus' with regard to green consumption. The use of Bourdieu's term 'habitus' signals that alternative consumption movements like heritage need to be seen as more than a self-conscious and individualised strategy to effect change through supporting or boycotting particular products. They are also a collective strategy informed by, and directed at capitalising on, the resources at consumers' disposal. The eco-habitus, according to Carfagna et al. (2014), reconfigures existing high status taste as a resource, and directs it towards ecological and other political goals.

For those who have cultural capital to draw on, heritage food discourse makes explicit the goal of changing the food system for the better. Implicitly, it is also a good way to reclassify basic foods such as carrots and beetroot, which would otherwise fail to distinguish their eater from the mass. It is part of what makes some carrots posh, in other words. Those convinced of the value of alternative consumption sometimes say that the dearth of working-class consumers in 'alternative' spaces results from a combination of financial exclusion and a disinterest in the wider politics of food (Paddock, 2016, p. 1047). Lifestyle features tackle this by pointing out how cheap heritage fruit and vegetables can be as well as educating readers on their importance. Heritage is a highly didactic discourse, whether concerned with old houses, works of art or carrots, educating people in appropriate concern for chosen relics of the past (Hall, 2005, p. 24). Because of the different tastes and different knowledges among consumers, the very act of proselytising about heritage also makes apparent and reinforces a sense of class boundaries. But this class differentiation is latent, while the manifest struggle is between those who are presented as doing their bit for a better food system, and those who will not see the truth of how much better their food could be. Heritage food discourse is therefore implicated in a foodie culture which shames working class food of the present through celebrating its supposed past.

For those not bitten by the heritage bug, heritage food discourse and heritage consumers may seem ridiculous, of course—something writers using ironic detachment are aware of. Thus heritage vegetable taste does not simply impose class boundaries from above, but is part of a complex cultural dance, where distaste for the food of others can be one way we know our place (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 56). But while working class consumers may see the latest trends in heritage food as “sterile and pretentious” (Bell & Hollows, 2005, p. 7), they lack the symbolic capital to displace the legitimacy of these tastes. Cultural capital and membership of a community where novel and political food causes are

accepted enable middle class consumers to pursue competitive strategies for distinction and to position others' tastes as inadequate or illegitimate.

Heritage foods' association with domestic spaces of production—the repeated focus on amateur home growing and seed swapping, the insistence of Michelin starred chefs on reminiscences about their childhood spent in the family vegetable patch—help to associate them with political sincerity and distance them from cynical, commercial motives (Johnston & Baumann, 2007, p. 179). Mechanised and professionalised systems of non-heritage growing imply a lack of personal care, of expertise and of artistry. “Common” or “garden” carrots are chopped up and stuck carelessly in plastic containers, while heritage carrots are linked with producers who are experts (agronomists and chefs, for example), and who also take care and time over their work. This ethic of care and precision also is evident in the celebration of pristine heritage gardens. The quality of care adds value to heritage produce, and is available to consumers who can afford the added cost, or who can invest their own time and knowledge in growing and preparing heritage vegetables and fruit.

Lifestyle texts suggest heritage vegetables are not only differentiated by care and time but by some character of their own. They are often anthropomorphised using their varietal names:

They have shady pasts and are the stuff of local legend. They're strictly ex-directory and go by names such as 'Crimson Giant', 'Ragged Jack' and 'Purple Flowered Russian'. They may sound like bad guys from Reservoir Dogs, but they are actually heritage veg varieties. (Low, 2008)

There is a repeated contrast between “tasteless, mass-produced fruit and veg forced in a vast greenhouse complex to fill supermarket shelves” (Johnston, 2015) and heirlooms with their “peculiar traits” (Stares, 2016), quirky names and colours, and general “rebellious lack of uniformity” (Low, 2008). The politicised taste for heritage is not only a taste for the diverse and characterful, it is a *distaste* for the mass-produced, the widely

available and the undifferentiated. This echoes a distaste for the mass of the population, “interchangeable and innumerable” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 468).

The very core of the political aspirations of heritage as a kind of alternative consumer movement—fighting corporate power, supporting biodiversity and cultural diversity, reclaiming better tasting food for consumers—are, in a socially divided society, unfortunately also mechanisms for reinforcing class boundaries. It can be difficult to see this because of the powerful rhetoric about passion, heroic championing of the consumer and the assumed universal value of heritage. The sharp-elbowed middle class consumer is hidden behind the mythical working-class forebear, though they can be glimpsed in mocking references to showing off at dinner parties. There is truth in the claims made about heritage food’s value and many want to get behind any popular movement to challenge the wanton destruction wrought by corporate greed. But we need to be mindful of the fact that the very politics themselves of heritage vegetable discourse are extremely productive mechanisms by which specialist food retailers, chefs, lifestyle journalists and consumers profit from social distinction, while appearing to do the opposite (Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Johnston & Cairns, 2012), something of a problem affecting alternative foodie culture more widely.

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