

Taste and Flavor: Variations on the Paella

Enric Bou

Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract Foodscapes in the Hispanic world are heterogeneous and conflicting and allow us to study how people think with food, using it to mark identities and establish power relations. Food is also related to memory and also generates a grammar. The reflection in this essay culminates with the case of paella, a non-existent dish, based on its history and a reading of a chapter from *Los mares del Sur* by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, a noted food critic and novelist.

Keywords Celebrations. Food and memory. Identity. Paella. Manuel Vázquez Montalbán.

Summary 1 Celebrations (Thanksgiving). – 2 Memory and Food. – 3 Grammar of Food. – 4 For a Theory of Paella. – 5 A Reading of 'Paella'. – 6 Paella Meanings. – 7 Conclusions.

Hence the link between narrative form and affect:
the form of narrative is the configuration of emotionally charged circumstances created by the telling.
(Caracciolo 2021, 5)

1 Celebrations (Thanksgiving)

During the two weeks leading up to 23 November (Thanksgiving in the US, 'Saint Gibin' in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic) I have been literally bombarded with two kinds of messages: Black Friday madness (or stupidity); and last-minute advice from the NYT on how to get ready for the biggest cooking experience of the year

without falling into desperation. Many articles dealt with how to prepare a festive dinner without too much stress. The emphasis was on economy (\$100 maximum budget), avoiding anxiety, organization (how to establish an order in the preparation of the dishes, etc.). On the same day, 23 November, I received one, perhaps the funniest one: “The Thanksgiving side dishes our readers called a ‘wild success’”.

Thanksgiving is commonly associated with a narrative of Pilgrims and Native Americans coming together for a peaceful feast, symbolizing unity and gratitude. However, critics argue that this narrative can be misleading and overlooks the darker aspects of history. The concept of hypocrisy regarding Thanksgiving often revolves around the historical context of the holiday and the way it is celebrated today. As we know, the “basic patterning of story is affective, and it is organized around generic expectations that tap into the forms of emotional experience” (Caracciolo 2021, 7). As stated by this author,

affective structure serves as a magnet, attracting a multitude of other patterns (textual as well as social and ideological) and staging the ways in which they reinforce or undermine one another. (7)

His conclusion is that narrative is an “extremely capacious and flexible macroform” (7). We could go even further as this is another way of referring to an almost classical concept, the invention of tradition, a concept that was introduced by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their 1983 book *The Invention of Tradition*. Hobsbawm’s introduction makes a clear distinction between new traditions and others that claim to be old but that are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented. This “invention” is distinguished from “starting” or “initiating” a tradition that does not then claim to be old (Hobsbawm, Ranger 1983, 1).

One aspect of hypocrisy is the romanticized version of the Pilgrims’ arrival and the subsequent colonization of North America. The traditional narrative tends to downplay or ignore the negative consequences for Native American communities, such as land dispossession, cultural assimilation, and the tragic impact of diseases brought by European settlers. This criticism reflects concerns about the selective and idealized interpretation of history associated with Thanksgiving. We could think of “terraformation” as Amitav Gosh does in his latest book (2021).

Additionally, the disconnect between the historical roots of Thanksgiving and the way it is celebrated today can be seen as hypocritical. While the holiday is ostensibly about gratitude and coming together, it has also been criticized for reinforcing certain stereotypes, promoting consumerism (particularly with Black Friday sales), and overshadowing the ongoing challenges faced by Native American communities.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of these issues, and some people choose to use Thanksgiving as an opportunity to reflect on the broader historical context, acknowledge the suffering of Native American communities, and engage in discussions about reconciliation and justice. As with any holiday, perspectives on Thanksgiving can vary widely, and discussions about its history and modern-day implications continue to evolve. My late friend Jon Knudsen was right when he took a very critical attitude toward many aspects of Thanksgiving celebrations.

While I was doing my – extremely organized – shopping and also during the cooking, many memories came back to me. Memories of previous experiences, memories of food (what we now call ‘gustemology’), adding layer after layer to the whole experience. From my first Thanksgiving invited by Joanne and Robert Scholes, and Pili and Bob Coover; reflections on the hypocrisy of the celebration towards the natives of North America (at least in one version of the festivity), with Jon Knudsen. So many memories, so many dead friends, so many tastes. Because food is memory. Food is text. Food is matter that speaks by itself in many different languages.

During those days I had the impression that ‘Thanksgiving’ (its spirit, the monster, Black Friday, whoever) was speaking to me in a language I could understand. The dream of Material Ecocriticism, the principle that matter speaks to us, was coming true. As we know, material ecocriticism proposes basically two ways of interpreting the agency of matter. The first one focuses on the way matter’s (or nature’s) nonhuman agentic capacities are described and represented in narrative texts (literary, cultural, visual); the second way focuses on matter’s ‘narrative’ power of creating configurations of meanings and substances, which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions. In this latter case, matter itself becomes a text where dynamics of “diffuse” agency and non-linear causality are inscribed and produced (Iovino, Oppermann 2012, 77-8). Because as stated by Iovino and Oppermann:

material ecocriticism aspires to be a way of “knowing” the connections, of seeing through narratives, of extending the fields of intelligibility. All narratives that explore and challenge the borders between the “inner” self and the “outer” world in terms of materiality, of causality, of intertwined agency are de facto part of a project of liberation – a cultural, ecological, ontological, and material liberation. Every vision intended to bridge the discursive and the material, the logos and the physis, mind and body, restoring new forms of awareness and conceptualization of our material out-side, is an enterprise of liberation. (2012, 87)

First let’s take a look at memory. Later on, to text and language.

2 Memory and Food

Memory is definitely linked to the material world through the senses. The madeleine cake is the symbol of the past that emerges involuntarily. Proust outlines a subjectivity that accumulates memories without realizing it (the madeleine, like any action, is lived naively), a subjectivity that is passively shaped by the world. If analysts speak of “affective consciousness” to describe the emergence of memories, it is to emphasize the non-active dimension assigned to the subject: memories come to him without being invoked. The media remember smell and taste, i.e., it is a sensory activity, not an intellectual one. But later, it is consciousness that re-establishes the thread of memory. Here we have a well-known excerpt from Marcel Proust’s novel:

Mais, quand d’un passé ancien rien ne subsiste, après la mort des êtres, après la destruction des choses, seules, plus frêles mais plus vivaces, plus immatérielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles, l’odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rap-peler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l’édifice im-mense du souvenir.

Et dès que j’eus reconnu le goût du morceau de madeleine trem-pé dans le tilleul que me donnait ma tante (quoique je ne susse pas encore et dusse remettre à bien plus tard de découvrir pour-quoi ce souvenir me rendait si heureux), aussitôt la vieille mai-son grise sur la rue, où était sa chambre, vint comme un décor de théâtre. (Proust 1954, 47)

When from the distant past nothing remains, after the beings have died, after the things are destroyed and scattered, still, alone, more fragile, yet more vital, more insubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of everything else; and bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the im-mense architecture of memory.

Yet again I had recalled the taste of a bit of madeleine dunked in a linden-flower tea which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long await the discovery of why this memory made me so happy), immediately the old gray house on the street where her room was found, arose like a theatrical tab-leau. (emphasis added)¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated English translations are by the Author.

Certain objects or smells elicit memory, they develop a connection between past and present. It seems that the past can become the present, meaning that the subject can somehow twist time and break the past/present dichotomy. Proust thus depicts a subjectivity imprisoned in the past and unable to forget. Consciousness is stuck in the past and suffers from its memory. The dominant time in the human condition seems to be the past in Proust's work: "the immense architecture of memory [...] immediately the old gray house on the street where her room was found, arose like a theatrical tableau".

Often known as 'Madeleine de Proust', 'The Proustian Effect', or 'The Proust Phenomenon', Proust's madeleine narrative serves as the premises of what we now know today as the contrast between voluntary and involuntary memory. Anthropologist David Sutton (2001; 2010) has used Proust's literary conception in his writings on food, senses, and memory, particular in his conceptualization on 'gustemology'. Gustemology, as Sutton explains it, is a theoretical approach that considers how food and the sensory experience of food become central in studying people and their relations with the cosmos, world-views, and ways of life (Lee 2023, 2).

If we adopt a gustemological approach, we consider the larger roles that food experiences play in the complexity of human life (Sutton 2010; Korsmeyer, Sutton 2011). While Sutton offers multiple perspectives for using/ applying gustemology as a food inquiry lens (e.g., food as cultural metaphors, terroir and placemaking, etc.), he advocates for memory as a central focal point when studying people's sensorial and philosophical relations with food (Lee 2023, 2). Sutton considers memory as an analogical "sixth sense", not necessarily as a sensorial receptacle but as a creative channel that communicates oneself and the world. By incorporating memory as a sense, one opens up new avenues for understanding people's gustemic lives. Just as how Proust described the madeleine's reverie, Sutton considers memory as powerful vessels buried within us, which once provoked, could "create channels of communication between past and present moments" (Korsmeyer, Sutton 2011, 472).

The intersection between food, memories, and Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) can reveal a lot about a person's identity, especially one's relation to political, socioeconomical, ethnical, familial, and cultural backgrounds (de Jong, Varley 2017; Ingram 2016).

Kai-Sean Lee (2023) has proposed that there are five interlinked constructs in food memory stories:

1. People and communality

Food activities are highly communal activities that render meaning only when shared with others. When inquiring about food memories, participants never shied away from the meals prepared by their immediate family members, specifically by the mothers of the household.

2. Foodmaking and the body
Embodied movements extended to different kitchen tools, functioning as extensions of the human nervous system during food-making. Through cooking and the “inalienable possessions” one uses, one awakens one’s memorial past, creating a channel communicating one’s past with the present.
3. Sense and synesthesia
This includes not only one’s gustatory system (taste), but also the olfactory (smell), tactile (touch), auditory (sound), and visual (sight). The interplay among these five senses anchors a memory in sensory – a process known as synesthesia. Synesthesia refers to how one sensory system informs and stimulates another, which collectively forms a sense impression of the particular food item.
4. Emotional reveries
A myriad of feelings and emotive states, both positive and negative that functions as energies that brings the memory into fruition. The memories of harvesting fruits, the mason jars, the recipe binders, and her mother’s handwriting.
5. Evocative sceneries
It represents the occasions and events in which the memory took place. These sceneries analogically provide a textured backdrop that contextualize the food memories, giving credence to the physical settings of the past. Everyday occasions of the family dinner table, special and celebratory occasions as scenic occasions; outdoor barbeques during the summer; lavishly prepared dishes on Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day, or other celebrations.

3 Grammar of Food

Now let’s pay some attention to food, text and grammar. Calvino’s fictional character, Palomar, comes to mind. He is lost inside a Parisian cheese store:

Questo negozio è un museo: il signor Palomar visitandolo sente, come al Louvre, dietro ogni oggetto esposto la presenza della civiltà che gli ha dato forma e che da esso prende forma.

Questo negozio è un dizionario; la lingua è il sistema dei formaggi nel suo insieme: una lingua la cui morfologia registra declinazioni e coniugazioni in innumerevoli varianti, e il cui lessico presenta una ricchezza inesauribile di sinonimi, usi idiomatici, connotazioni e sfumature di significato, come tutte le lingue nutrite dall’apporto di cento dialetti.

È una lingua fatta di cose; la nomenclatura ne è solo un aspetto esteriore, strumentale; ma per il signor Palomar impararsi un po’

di nomenclatura resta sempre la prima misura da prendere se vuole fermare un momento le cose che scorrono davanti ai suoi occhi.

Estrae di tasca un taccuino, una penna, comincia a scriversi dei nomi, a segnare accanto a ogni nome qualche qualifica che permetta di richiamare l'immagine alla memoria; prova anche a disegnare uno schizzo sintetico della forma. (Calvino 1994, 66-7; emphasis added)

This shop is a museum: Mr. Palomar, visiting it, feels as he does in the Louvre, behind every displayed object the presence of the civilization that has given it form and takes form from it.

This shop is a dictionary; the language is the system of cheeses as a whole: a language whose morphology records declensions and conjugations in countless variants, and whose lexicon presents an inexhaustible richness of synonyms, idiomatic usages, connotations, and nuances of meaning, as in all languages nourished by the contribution of a hundred dialects. It is a language made up of things; its nomenclature is only an external aspect, instrumental; but for Mr. Palomar, learning a bit of nomenclature still remains the first measure to be taken if he wants to stop for a moment the things that are flowing before his eyes.

From his pocket he takes a notebook and a pen, and begins to write down some names, marking beside each name some feature that will enable him to recall the image to his memory; he tries also to make a synthetic sketch of the shape.

Palomar's situation reminds us that currently there are three different ways of accessing food: through street vendors or specialized food stores such as *macellaio*, *verduriere*, *pescivendolo*, you can get the raw materials: meat, vegetables and fish. To this we could add more commercial venues such as supermarkets (including EatItaly); cooked food: at home or at the restaurant, where the raw materials are fixed, cooked, prepared; a third instance would be pre-cooked (or destroyed) food, such as the one you can obtain at the supermarket.

In the following chapter of Calvino's book, "Il marmo e il sangue", Palomar pays attention to a poster explaining the different parts of an ox:

In un cartellone al muro, il profilo d'un bue appare come una carta geografica percorsa da linee di confine che delimitano aree d'interesse mangereccio, comprendenti l'intera anatomia dell'animale, esclusi corna e zoccoli. La mappa dell'habitat umano è questa, non meno del planisfero del pianeta, entrambi protocolli che dovrebbero sancire i diritti che l'uomo s'è attribuito, di possesso, spartizione e divoramento senza residui dei continenti terrestri e dei lombi del corpo animale. (69)

In a poster on the wall, the profile of an ox appears as a map traversed by boundary lines delineating areas of eating interest, encompassing the animal's entire anatomy, excluding horns and hooves. This is the map of the human habitat, no less than the planisphere of the planet, both protocols that are supposed to enshrine the rights that man has ascribed to himself, of possession, partitioning and devouring without residue the terrestrial continents and the loins of the animal body.

An identity aspect linked to food gives rise to the mapping of foodscapes or food landscapes (Atkins 2005), which in the case of tourism, supported by a guidebook or a thousand web pages – disorienting and of dubious credibility –, help us to find the 'typical' food of the place we are visiting. When Pedro Salinas 'discovered' California in 1941, he was horrified to find out that the food was identical throughout the country, including all the customs and gestures that governed the eating ceremony, which led him to conclude that the US was an "ironed" country, with hardly any differences between regions:

It is curious the terrible monotony of this country. It differs from California to the extreme, from the East, from the Atlantic coast. Light, climate, landscape, everything is different. But the social conventions are the same, or with very slight variations. You are served the same things for tea, you know that you must spend the usual three quarters of an hour, and no more, and when you leave, the same words are repeated. And so on, in everything. [...] I think there are two factors that have flattened, so to speak, America. (It gives me the effect of a flattened country, without unevenness, flat, flat, equal). One is education, the other is commerce and industry. [...] In Spain. What a delight! To change region, city, sometimes village, was to find something new, typical and original. Each land had its grace, its stamp, which was noticeable even in that. Here, my daughter, the "apple pie" is the only sweet that is served from North to South and East to West. (Salinas 1996, 166)

Nowadays we would call it a 'placeless foodscape'. As explained by Roberta Sonnino, the concept of embeddedness serves to characterize two types of food systems:

at one end, there is the dis-embedded globalized food system, the 'placeless foodscape' of countries such as the UK and the US; at the other end, there are the more embedded, localized food systems of countries such as France and Italy, where food products appear to be forever rooted in a particular place. (Sonnino 2007)

However, according to Sonnino, local food systems emerge through a dynamic process of spatial manipulation; they are not fixed and perfectly delimited geographical entities, but place is presented as a socio-cultural construct that participants in local food webs may have to constantly negotiate and redefine in order to protect the identity of their products (Sonnino 2007). The concept of placeless foodscape can be applied to pasta and pizza or paella, dishes with profound variations according to location, but which have a conceptual entity shared by millions of people, minus the locals. This is scholarly and entertainingly demonstrated by Luca Cesari in *Storia della pasta in dieci piatti* (2021) and *Storia della pizza. Da Napoli a Hollywood* (2023).

Massimo Montanari has proposed a grammar of food: these would be the conventions that shape the food system not as a simple sum of products and foods, but as a structure within which each element defines its meaning. The lexicon is constituted by the repertoire of available products. Morphology refers to the ways in which products are transformed and adapted to different consumption needs, through cooking practices: concrete gestures and procedures. Syntax is the order of dishes according to criteria of succession, juxtaposition and mutual relationship, defined differently according to cultures and social classes, as well as according to availability. In the syntactic structure of the meal, the complements that may define what eventually precede, accompany, follow, are defined according to the main subjects: starters, interludes, side dishes, desserts. The meal acquires all its expressive capacity thanks to rhetoric, which is the necessary complement of any language. Rhetoric implies adapting the discourse to the subject, to the effects one wishes to elicit. If discourse is food, it is the way it is prepared, of serving it, of consuming it (Montanari 2010, 137-41).

4 For a Theory of Paella

Paella is a traditional Spanish dish that originated in the Valencia region. While it may not have mythologies in the traditional sense, it does have interesting stories and legends associated with its origin. Here are a couple of anecdotes related to the creation of paella. One popular legend attributes the creation of paella to Valencia's farmworkers. According to this story, field laborers would cook rice with vegetables and whatever meats were available to them in a large flat pan over an open fire. The ingredients included rabbit, snails, beans, and various spices. The dish was practical for the workers, as it could be prepared easily in the fields during their lunch breaks. Another version involves the Water Tribunal of Valencia, a historical institution responsible for distributing water among the region's rice fields. The story goes that after their meetings, members of the

Water Tribunal would gather together to cook a communal meal using ingredients like rabbit, chicken, and vegetables, creating what we now know as 'paella'. While these stories add a charming touch to the history of paella, it is important to note that the dish has evolved over time, and there are various regional variations. In its traditional form, paella includes rice, saffron, and a variety of vegetables and meats, but there are countless modern interpretations with different ingredients. The dish has become a symbol of Spanish cuisine and is enjoyed by people around the world.

There are some *terroir* elements (the complete natural environment in which a particular wine/food is produced, including factors such as the soil, topography, and climate) that we have to take into account.

1. Rice Cultivation:

The fertile lands surrounding the Albufera lagoon in Valencia were well-suited for rice cultivation. Rice paddies became a common sight in the region, providing the essential ingredient for paella.

2. Saffron and Seasonings:

Saffron, a spice derived from the flower *Crocus sativus*, played a crucial role in paella. It not only contributed to the dish's vibrant yellow color but also added a distinctive and rich flavor. Local spices and herbs were also used to enhance the taste.

3. Social Gatherings:

As paella gained popularity, it became a centerpiece of social gatherings and celebrations in Valencia. The communal aspect of preparing and sharing a large paella dish became a symbol of togetherness and community.

4. Evolution and Variations:

Over time, different variations of paella emerged. The availability of ingredients and regional preferences led to the creation of distinct types of paella. For example, seafood paella became popular along the coastal areas, incorporating a variety of fresh seafood.

5. Cultural Symbol:

Paella became more than just a dish; it became a cultural symbol representing the rich agricultural history of Valencia. It also symbolized the resourcefulness of the people who, with locally available ingredients, created a flavorful and satisfying meal.

Today, paella is celebrated not only in Spain but around the world. It has become a versatile dish with numerous regional and international adaptations. The story of paella reflects the connection between a region's geography, agriculture, and the creativity of its people in crafting a dish that has left an indelible mark on global cuisine.

How do common cultural practices of particular foods and foodways become myth? Food and food practices, as Barthes argues in

Mythologies, become naturalized, dehistoricized, and turned into cultural myth through an endless discourse that disconnects them from actual reality and hollows out the real experience of eating and cooking. This dehistoricization makes them feel so familiar that they shift to a state of being “natural”, to what we know as “common meaning” (Barthes 1957, 181-94). Three aspects of Barthesian myth contribute to a critical theorization of food narratives: 1) the slippage of language, 2) the dehistoricization of cultural objects and practices, as well as 3) the use of language to convey assumptions about the concreteness and correctness of cultural practices. Myth has no specific connection to actual concrete reality; it is constructed solely through the use of language and discourse within a particular culture. The extensive and repeated discussion of a particular practice or word is the mechanism that turns everyday practices into myth, and this endless discourse influences the slippage of words and their meanings, in turn influencing the construction of myth. This problem has an extraordinary example in the work of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, regarding rice in its paella format.

Paella does not exist. In its purest mythical-Barthesian version, the word ‘paella’ refers to something that does not exist. It is both metonymy and synecdoche. Synecdoche because it summarizes in that word a rancid version of the Spanish identity. Metonymy because it metaphorically substitutes something that has never existed and that has been invented to satisfy (or satiate the hunger of) the tourist imaginary in a version of the cheesiest Spanishness: those yellowish dishes, with a color that is not produced by the effect of saffron, but by a low-quality culinary coloring and of sure harmful effects for the health. I am referring to those photos of unappetizing yellowish rice dishes in any tourist town on the Spanish coast. When paella is transplanted to other latitudes, wonderful things happen, as shown by the menu of this wedding in New Hampshire, which offers four authentic paellas: seafood, peasant, vegetarian and the typically Cuban, Fidel Castro-style paella [\(fig. 1\)](#).

In the prologue to *Eating in the Valencian Country*, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán acknowledged the difficulty or impossibility of finding paella, that is, its non-existence:

A fervent supporter of rice, I have been, am and will be a traveler through the Valencian country with a candle in my hand in search of rice dishes sunk by some cultural disaster. Like Atlantis. I am afraid. (Vázquez Montalbán 1981)

On that occasion he explained very well the difference between different ways of cooking rice:

For most Spaniards, Valencian cuisine is reduced to paella. And if you ask what they mean by paella, they give you the recipe for a

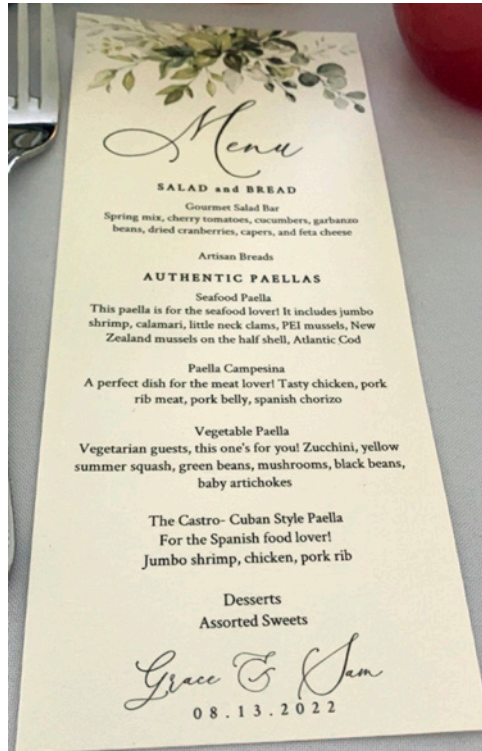


Figure 1
Wedding menu, New Hampshire.
© Alexandre Bou-Rhodes

dish that no Valencian would recognize as paella. Internationalized paella is a rice stew in which meat and fish are mixed with any vegetable, with the exception of bananas. On the other hand, Valencians only recognize as authentic an inland paella, made with chicken, rabbit and bajocons (very wide beans characteristic of the area). A few snails are added to this rudimentary paella when it is their time, never when they hibernate. (Vázquez Montalbán 1981)

Paella is a complicated word. It refers both to a dish, a way of fixing rice, originally in the País Valencià region; but also to the object, a special kind of iron skillet with two handles that is used to prepare that dish. And allow me a footnote: most people in València speak of *arròs*, not *paella*, when referring to that dish.

Everyone seems to know what it means to eat paella, when in fact what everyone really knows is the discourse about paella, i.e., we talk about what it means to eat paella, but talking about paella does not equal the experience of eating paella: words try to convey the experience, but can never capture what it means to actually eat it. The met-language associated with our food stories, or narratives, begin to

supplant the actual experience. So the conversation about food narratives feels like it replaces the actual experiences with food or the forms of food. As food objects become myths, we ascribe meaning to the narrative that extends beyond the physical properties of the object's ability to provide sustenance. Food and food forms, as they undergo the process of dehistoricization, move from the literal to the figurative, and 'food' becomes 'food narrative'.

Regina Bendix, for her part, has studied the manipulation (from the point of view of the invention of traditions) of the most theoretically genuine elements of a cultural tradition:

from the perspective of originators and performers, "local color", "tradition", and "folklore" are and always have been open for strategic use, and regarding tourism as the main agent of change would seem to be a misconception. Cultural displays require staging and thus negotiation of some sort [...]. Tourism and its concerns simply add a further element in the staging process. (Bendix 2018, 38)

Bendix's commentary helps us to understand the performative aspect contained in the word 'paella' as it evokes particular actions. Brulotte and Di Giovine have studied how food is used to mark insiders and outsiders within ethnic groups; how meanings of the same food change within a particular society according to class, gender, or taste; and how traditions are "invented" for the economic and social revitalization of communities (Brulotte, Di Giovine 2014, 2). The case of paella is particularly useful because it awakens a network of associations and because of its ubiquity, a food landscape, physical or mental and at the same time changing. No Spaniard would ever enter a place like the one in the photo [fig. 2].

Paella is the subject of endless controversies and contradictions. The 2014 polemic about paella is an example of a discussion in *ritornello* that is repeated every few years about the real recipe of this key dish in the Hispanic recipe book (López Iturriaga 2014). See, also, the controversy about the paella emoticon that defined it as "rice with things" (Sánchez Manzanaro 2019); it is one more proof of how a dish of popular origin is transformed into something different.

Talking (or writing) about paella is a dangerous topic on which almost everyone wants to have an opinion. A *parti pris* that brings one closer to no man's land - or paella. The Valencian writer Josep Piera is the author of a remarkable book, *El llibre daurat. La història de la paella com no s'ha contat mai* (2018), in which he proposes a chronological narrative that helps us get to the final recipe for making a good paella. Piera digs into the myths up to the present day mixing fictional data with real ones providing an immense corpus of information that begins when Alexander the Great took rice from Persia to Egypt and Greece up to the present day. Piera analyzes most of



Figure 2
Paellería Gaudí, Barcelona.
© Enric Bou

the treatises that speak of the various preparations, making comparisons and refuting spurious theories. In 1856, the first great recipe for Valencian-style rice appeared in Paris by Urban Dubois, a famous French chef and, therefore, of worldwide prestige. As he explains in the book,

Dubois's recipe was pantagruelous: it had beef and pork fillets, ham, sausages, chickens, rabbits, pigeons, partridges, eels, pagillos [common pandora or 'pagell'], snails [...] and even other gluttonies or whims of the south. (Piera 2018, 92)

Piera recognizes the characteristic diversity of this dish when he states:

Anyone who thinks that in Valencian cuisine you eat the same and only rice dish is wrong; the rice is cooked differently and with a diversity that avoids monotony. The variety of dishes that can be prepared with this cereal is so great that it can be said that there are more than there are days in the year; how there are simple and complicated ones; cheap and expensive; of rich and poor; easy and difficult; traditional and improvised, on Sundays and on Mondays. Valencians eat rice for taste, but also for food needs. That's why we've done with rice what the Italians do with pasta: we eat it every day, but it doesn't always taste the same. (Piera 2018, 99)

His enthusiasm leads him to lyrical definitions, but in which he combines a sense of variety and diversity with the impossibility of finding a single recipe:

Paella is an exaltation of life, a culinary celebration. In every season, in every place or season of the year, in every house and in

every kitchen, there are different rice dishes known as paella. Coquinary polysemy. What do we call a paella, then?

Paella is an ancestral meal of the Valencians; for others, it doesn't matter where on the planet they eat it, it is an appetizing culinary exoticism and one of the most appreciated gastronomic singularities, where many find a taste of the Hispanic temperament. There is no canonical interpretation or recipe, but as many possibilities as circumstances, cooks, diners, guests, experts or commentators.

The pan lives in a ceaseless metamorphosis since its origins, and that is why it can be considered a changing representation of humanity. And this is due to the skills of the cook on duty, to the conditions and seasonings of each moment, to the appetite and palate of the diners, to the time and place, the custom, the climate, the consciousnesses and subconsciousnesses [...] All the reasons or excuses are valid, since none of them are bad if the cooking point of the rice is right. (Piera 2018, 145-6)

This sample of opinions has one thing in common: they all express the frustration, the difficulty, of defining or finding the real paella. But does it really exist? Literature offers us a possible solution to the enigma.

5 A Reading of 'Paella'

Food is a social event and a myriad of economic, cultural and ethnological interests and variables revolve around it. Decisions about what to eat, how food is prepared, presented and consumed, and with whom to share the table are of radical importance. These three variants express complex relationships of class, ethnicity, religion and gender. Food studies uncover the complexity behind a material aspect of everyday life that impacts and affects multiple social networks, where food is both the material and the symbol by which class, race/ethnicity, sex/gender are socially constructed.

Italian critic Gian-Paolo Biasin, in his study *The Flavors of Modernity. Food and the Novel*, raised an almost obvious point:

when the novel deals with food, a culinary sign, it adds richness to richness, it superimposes its own system of signs and meanings onto the signifying system, variously codified, of cooking. (Biasin 1993, 3)

In literature, culinary signifiers have a particularly powerful effect. Biasin notes that food in literature serves several functions. Its main purpose is usually mimetic, realistic: "Usually meals are social occasions in extratextual reality, and novelists rightly use them, in

the possible worlds they create, in a narrative function". As Roland Barthes already pointed out – recalls Biasin – the inclusion of seemingly extraneous details serves an important function in narrative fiction: it gives the impression that a scene is "real" and reinforces the illusion that the described world is fundamentally identical to the real world (Biasin 1993, 11-12).

But food also fulfills two other important functions: it has a cognitive function: to stage the search for meaning that takes place whenever one reflects on the relationship between the self, the world and others, or between the subject, nature and history. This reflection is facilitated to some extent by the fact that precisely in food (as in certain landscapes) nature and history tend to be united (17). The other function is tropological: the use of food can contain in itself a whole discourse that can be moral, ideological, affective or social. As Biasin explains, it is

inherent in the very structure of the culinary sign and of the verbal sign: it is the analogic transformation (metaphor), or the displacement by contiguity (metonymy), or the linking by comparison or similitude, or the arbitrary attribution of significance (symbol), whereby a given food is also other than what it is literally, and this other (a rhetorical figure) often contains within itself an entire discourse. (20)

A discourse can be moral, ideological, affective or social, but when it is expressed within a rhetorical figure it is, above all, a literary discourse, that is to say, an inquiry, knowledge and expression proper to literature, and not to historiography or gastronomy (20).

In *Los mares del Sur* (Southern Seas) we find a definitive example of putting Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's gastronomic knowledge into practice, which at the same time coincides with a key moment in the novel and the resolution of some of the questions surrounding the character of Stuart Pedrell and his mysterious disappearance. It is one of the central episodes, the dinner that Sergio Beser, Enric Fuster and Pepe Carvalho have in the former's apartment. In a small apartment with walls covered with books, the library and the kitchen present a remarkable symbiosis in the development of the action, since the after-dinner conversation is dominated by the readings of some mysterious messages left by the missing Stuart Pedrell. The scene also constitutes the core of the novel. I would add that it also contains in nuce the deep sense of the novel. The scene begins with a strange symbiosis between reading and cooking books.

Beser vivía en un piso de San Cugat en el que sólo había libros y una cocina. Parecía un Mefistófeles pelirrojo con acento valenciano. Riñó a Fuster por un retraso que ponía en peligro la paella.

- Hoy tomarás una paella valenciana de verdad- le informó Fuster.
- ¿Has hecho lo que te dije?

Beser juró que había seguido todas las instrucciones del gestor. Inició Fuster la marcha hacia la cocina a través de un pasillo lleno de libros. Carvalho pensaba que con la mitad de aquellas existencias tenía asegurado el fuego en su chimenea hasta que muriera. Como si adivinara sus pensamientos, Fuster exclamó sin volver la espalda:

- Cuidado, Sergio, que éste es un quemalibros. Los utiliza para encender la chimenea.

Beser se enfrentó a Carvalho con los ojos iluminados.

- ¿Es cierto?

- Completamente cierto.

- Ha de producir un placer extraordinario.

- Incomparable.

- Mañana empezaré a quemar aquella estantería. Sin mirar qué libros son.

- Produce mucho más placer escogerlos.

- Soy un sentimental y los indultaría. (Vázquez Montalbán 1979, 95-6)

Beser lived in San Cugat, in a flat that seemed to contain nothing but books and a kitchen. He was like a red-haired Mephistopheles with a Valencian accent. He scolded Fuster for their late arrival, which had placed the paella in jeopardy.

'Today you'll have a real paella valenciana', he informed Fuster.

'Have you followed what I told you?'

Beser swore that he had followed his mentor's instructions to the letter. Fuster began walking through the book-lined corridor towards the kitchen. Carvalho mused that with just half of such a stock, he could have a fire in his grate from now until the day he died. As if sensing what was in the detective's mind, and without turning round, Fuster warned:

'Careful, Sergio, this guy burns books. He uses them to light the fire.'

'Is that true?'

'Absolutely'.

'It must give extraordinary pleasure'.

'There's nothing to beat it'.

'Tomorrow I'll start to burn this shelf. Without even looking at what books are there'.

'It gives even more pleasure if you choose them'.

'I'm a sentimentalist, though. I'd be sure to retrieve some of them'.

The description of Professor Beser's kitchen is remarkable. And it is not the only one in the novel. In another episode, when Carvalho

enters Stuart Pedrell's apartment-hiding place in the San Magín neighborhood, as a good detective, he establishes an exhaustive control of the bookshelves and the kitchen. Both, in clear contrast with Sergio Beser's, present a desolate aspect. The two kitchens, Beser's and Pedrell's, seem to confirm what Imma Forino has highlighted in the section "Uomini in cucina", where she reflects on the transformation of the domestic kitchen due to the appearance of single male cooks as seen in films such as Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960). Cooking in front of others "assumes an important significance not only in terms of self-presentation and self-revoicing, but also for the purpose of a recipe". She quotes an excerpt from Noëlle Châtelet's book, *Le corps à corps culinaire* (1977):

there is no dish that is not suitable to be commented on, assimilated. Judged, by all who will later consume it. Instead, the city boy, a true servant also relegated to the most remote of the seats, is angry at not being able to take part in the joy of his just-arrived guests, and his work becomes a punishment. For that matter, punished are also the guests who stand still and disheveled, their nostrils irritated by an aroma whose origin they cannot specify. (Forino 2019, 345)

This is exactly what takes place in Sant Cugat's kitchen: it is a choral act, starring only men pontificating about paella.

Then follows a discussion that has been going on since time immemorial in that immaterial border (between Valencia and Catalonia) of the paella foodscape about whether it should be cooked with or without onion. Sergio Beser is from Morella, an exarlist and mountainous place, far from the sea, and he finds himself in that gray area of the dividing line, a sort of DMZ that separates the paella parallels. When Beser tries to convince Fuster with bibliography on the paella that onion can be used, this one claims: "Don't come to me with books by people who are not from Villosres. *Morellano de mierda*. I am guided only by popular memory" (Vázquez Montalbán 1979, 96). The consultation of the bibliography on rice is presided over by Fuster's declamation of the well-known "Oda a la paella" by José María Pemán:

¡Oh insigne sinfonía de todos los colores!	O noble symphony of all the colors!
¡Oh ilustre paella	O illustrious paella
por fuera con su blusa de colores,	with its colorful blouse on the outside,
quemadita por dentro con ansias de doncella!	burnt inside with maidenly eagerness!
¡Oh policromo plato colorista.	Oh polychrome colorful dish.
que antes que con el gusto se come con la vista!	that is eaten with the sight rather than with the taste!
Concentración de glorias donde nada se deja.	Concentration of glories where nothing is left.
Compromiso de Caspe entre el pollo y la almeja.	Compromise of Caspe between chicken and clam.
¡Oh plato decisivo:	O decisive dish:
gremial y colectivo!	both individual and collective!
¡Oh plato delicioso donde todo es hermoso	O delicious dish where all is beautiful
y todo se distingue, pero nada está roto!	and everything is different, but nothing is broken!
¡Oh plato liberal donde un grano	O liberal dish where a grain
es un grano como un hombre es un voto!	is a grain as a man is a vote!

This bibliographical interlude closes with Beser's acknowledgment of his terrible mistake:

'You were right. Onion isn't used in the paella of the people of Castellón. It was a lapse. A catalanism. I'll have to go to Morella. I'm in urgent need of a refresher course'.

'Ha!' exclaimed Fuster, as he threw the onion into the rubbish bin. 'I made myself quite clear. Half a kilo of rice, half a chicken, a quarter-kilo of pork shoulder, a quarter-kilo of peas, two peppers, two tomatoes, parsley, saffron, salt, and nothing else. Anything else is superfluous'. (Vázquez Montalbán 1979, 97)

Curiously, in Beser's self-criticism and Fuster's final reprimand, linguistic terms such as "catalanism" and "foreign word" are used, further strengthening the link between books/bookstore and cuisine that characterized the beginning of the scene. Then they begin the process of cooking a paella. This transformation becomes an authentic theatrical performance. But first, Fuster has a surprise in store for Beser, as he has brought him *flaons* (a dessert that already appears in the first Catalan recipe books, which establishes a tradition that continues to this day), one of the fundamental sweets of Morella's cuisine:

'Flaons! Did you make these for me, Enric?'

They embraced like two compatriots meeting at the South Pole, and explained to the by now inebriated Carvalho that flaons are the absolute best patisserie to be had in all the Catalan lands. Throughout the Maestrazgo, they are made with oily dough, aniseed and sugar, and filled with curd cheese, ground almond, egg, cinnamon and grated lemon peel.

'My sister sent them yesterday. Curd cheese is very awkward and goes off very quickly'. (Vázquez Montalbán 1979, 97-8)



Figure 3 Flaons de Morella. © Enric Bou

The cooking goes on at a good pace and they act out one of the best known popular phrases about the preparation of paella: “Fins el fum serà bo” (even the smoke will be good). This is how they finish the preparation:

Beser and Fuster caught the aroma coming from the paella.

‘Too much pepper’, Beser suggested.

‘Wait till you taste it, idiot’, replied Fuster, bending like an alchemist over his retort vials.

A few snails to add the final touch. That’s what’s missing. Pepe, today you’ll have a real paella from its homeland, the one they used to make before fishermen corrupted it by drowning the fish in roux’. (98)

The mention of an “authentic country” may refer to the *petit pays*, that is, to Morella, but it may also be an impossible abstraction of the place where the “authentic” paella is made, that foodscape impossible to define as Mackendrick pointed out. It indicates, on the other hand, that there is a strong link between the dish and form, the recipes for cooking it and the gestures (which no recipe book manages to reproduce) to prepare it, as well as with its geography/locality.

The paella episode continues and as soon as the cooking is finished, they move on to the tasting. The narrator, with great philological fidelity, insists on a typical anthropological aspect of the way of eating paella in a rural environment, tasting it directly from the container in which it has been cooked:

They put the paella on the kitchen table, and Carvalho prepared to eat it country-style, without plates, simply demarcating a portion of territory within the container. In theory it was a paella for five people, whose only effort would be to keep themselves well lubricated. They finished the five-litre bottle of wine, and began another. Then Beser brought out a bottle of Mistela de Alcalá de Chisvert for the flaons. (Vázquez Montalbán 1979, 98)

The preparations in the kitchen, the tasting, the large amount of wine ingested (a five-liter carafe and they start a second one) put them in shape for the inspired literary analysis that will reveal itself as the beginning of the resolution of the mystery associated with the South Seas.

The three functions, according to Biasin, of the presence of food in a literary work are thus fulfilled: the mimetic-realistic one, a group of friends cooking paella; the cognitive function, which stages the search for meaning about the relationship between the self, the world and others, when the different ways of cooking or versions of paella are confronted; and finally the tropological function: the use of food contains a moral, ideological, affective or social discourse, here it is the key to solving the mystery of a detective novel.

The chapter has a single purpose: to reveal the meaning of these quotations, a mixture of notes from a suicide and messages in a bottle thrown by a castaway. But at the same time, the characters present an authentic review of the components of the paella foodscape: ingredients, cooking methods, tasting methods and complementary literary references, which bring us closer to an interpretation of its cultural meaning. In fact, a contrast of places, small homelands, petit pays, abroad, Catalonia, etc. is proposed. And also an 'authenticity' of paella according to the geographical proximity to the place of original invention. Through the discussion of the practice of paella we also note that the foodscape varies according to the change of the natural landscape (what the land/sea/orchard offers) and the distance from the place of consumption.

6 Paella Meanings

In this brief tour through the different versions, the complementary and contradictory meanings of the word 'paella', of its mythification, in the gastronomic and detective work of Vázquez Montalbán, we find a construction of a foodscape, which in part coincides with the most common clichés, because paella is practice, memory, fiction. The foodscape constructs a portrait that is not only gastronomic and that goes beyond the world of gastronomy. Vázquez Montalbán's wisdom makes us understand this complex food landscape. But at the same time it serves to confirm this author's use of cuisine as a metaphor for

culture and its hypocritical content. For as Terry Eagleton (1997) has reminded us, food is infinitely interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, reward, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation. In the specific case of this novel, paella as a concept, its mystery and multiple versions, and the performance of the preparation, function as background to the key moment of the novel: the resolution of the meaning of the mysterious literary quotations that Stuart Pedrell has left as decoys that may explain his disappearance. The parallelism between cooking and reading, between recipes and literary quotations, becomes the method for the resolution of the mystery about the secret life of the industrialist. But, at the same time, perhaps without knowing it, Vázquez Montalbán also unveils the mystery about the non-existence of this mythical dish. Non-existent and only realized in the kitchen and imagination of each one of us, gourmets and readers. As I have highlighted above, Barthes looked at the inherent dehistoricization of food because of its status as myth. Paella feels so familiar that it shifts to a 'natural' state of being, to what we know as 'common meaning'. If paella is one of the pillars of the gastronomic identity of Spaniards, the conclusion of Pemán's poem ("Oh liberal dish where a grain is a grain | as a man is a vote!") alerts us to something unsuspected. Thus, by delving into the concept of paella, not only does an (inter)national myth about the quintessence of Spanish culinary identity fall, but it helps us to conclude that this identity is as disintegrated and individualistic as each of the grains of rice on the plate.

This problem is inscribed in the reflections proposed by Lucy Long, according to whom culinary tourism is not only food for tourists, but

the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of another - participation including the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to belong to a culinary system not one's own. (Long 2004, 21)

With Spanish hyper-regionalism, each region (and people) claims its particularism, as defended by Carvalho, who demystifies the idea of a national gastronomy and "is against accepting the existence of national-state cuisines" (Vázquez Montalbán 2002, 47). Culinary tourism is practiced not only when we travel, but also at home, or when we dine at the ethnic restaurant around the corner. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called the heritage labeling of fragments of culture a "value-added industry" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995, 370-2). In 2004 she coined the term "metacultural production" to refer to the process that includes attitudes, values about traditional cultural expressions and their instrumentalization. As I mentioned before, it is frustrating and difficult trying to define or find the real paella. Because it does not exist. Reading Vázquez Montalbán's culinary essays and novels allows us to get closer to a possible solution of the enigma.

7 Conclusions

Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, in their “Introduction: Stories Come to Matter” in *Material Ecocriticism* (2014), declared that “there is no simple juxtaposition or mirroring between nature and culture, but a combined ‘mesh’”. Their thesis is that culture and nature become a hybrid compound, coagulating, to use Haraway’s term, into naturecultures. This natural-cultural plexus is the key to our world and, therefore, the starting point of any critical analysis (Iovino, Oppermann 2014, 5-6).

The case of paella shows us that it is not only a dish that is prepared in the País Valencià, but something much more convoluted. The act of ingesting food is an act of exchange of different bodies (human and more than human) but which in turn carry stories of colonialism (rice comes from Persia), pollution (vegetables contaminated by toxic waste), manipulation of traditions. Similarly to a such as chocolate that can ‘speak’ as a symbol of a military defeat, as Pardo Bazán does.

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