

Constructing quality: The multinational histories of chocolate

Julie L. Cidell ^{a,*}, Heike C. Alberts ^b

^a *Department of Geography and Environmental Studies, California State University – San Bernardino, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407, United States*

^b *Department of Geography and Urban Planning, University of Wisconsin – Oshkosh, 800 Algoma Blvd., Oshkosh, WI 54901, United States*

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Abstract

Geographic research on food quality, while considering many of the ways in which quality is socially constructed, has largely focused on the place-based aspects of the raw materials of food production. Here, we use French convention theory to look at a highly processed food in order to show how place associations in the social construction of food quality extend to manufacturing. For chocolate, quality is based on material characteristics whose relative importance in determining quality depends on the country in which different stages of economic innovation took place. Struggles over the definition of quality chocolate, as exemplified by the “European Chocolate War,” show how quality issues are connected to geographies of manufacturing and innovation.

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“Geography is a flavor.”

—Starbucks in-store advertisement

1. Introduction

Geographers and sociologists have shown how food quality is both socially and materially constructed in a number of different ways. Studies of the agro-food industry have demonstrated how biological constraints distinguish this industry from others, including the ways in which quality is defined (Marsden, 1997; Murdoch et al., 2000; Winter, 2003). In some cases geographical characteristics also help to determine what counts as quality wine, cheese, produce, or other foodstuffs (Ilbery and Kneafsey, 2000b; Mansfield, 2003a,b). Small-scale producers are increasingly relying on connections between place and product as an indicator of quality or even to define a product, such as Champagne or Stilton cheese (Treager et al., 1998; Parrott et al., 2002;

Barham, 2003). Though these connections are often in the name of “alternative” food provision and “community” (Hinrichs, 2003; Whatmore et al., 2003), economic considerations are more likely at the heart of linking food to place, whether by local producers or national or supranational organizations attempting to lift up lagging rural regions (Renting et al., 2003; Winter, 2003), or large corporations capitalizing on connections to place (as in the opening quotation).

Researchers have emphasized the need to connect place and quality throughout the commodity chain because quality is defined differently at different points in the chain based on power relationships between different actors (Murdoch et al., 2000; Fold, 2000; Mansfield, 2003a). In this article, we focus on the later links in the cocoa-chocolate commodity chain, analyzing the chocolate industry as an example of an industry where definitions of quality are closely connected to the places where the chocolate is manufactured, rather than where the raw materials are sourced. As we argue, chocolate quality is based on variations in processing and manufacturing, including the blend of ingredients used by different processors (such as the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jcidell@csusb.edu (J.L. Cidell).

percentage of cocoa solids or milk) and the emphasis placed on different stages of the manufacturing process (such as the length of conching). The extent to which those material characteristics matter is based on history: which country invented which step of the process, and the mix of ingredients the leading manufacturers use. By this argument, the Dutch are known for their cocoa powder and non-sugary chocolate since they invented cocoa powder; the Belgians, who first developed candies consisting of soft centers enrobed in harder chocolate, are known for these pralines; the Swiss have notably smooth chocolate because they invented the conching process; and Spanish chocolate is most similar to that originally brought over from Mexico, including its liquid form. This is not to say that these innovations were not later adopted in other locations, but simply that regional differences in the definition of “quality” chocolate are closely tied to where particular innovations were *first* introduced.

The most important material characteristic in determining the quality of chocolate is the percentage of cocoa solids in the final product (Fabricant, 1998). The so-called European Chocolate War centered in part on controversy over using the percentage of cocoa solids as a definition of chocolate quality, or even as the definition of chocolate. This decades-long disagreement consisted of two issues: whether vegetable fats other than cocoa butter (CBEs, or cocoa butter equivalents) could be allowed in chocolate, and what the appropriate percentages are of milk and cocoa solids in milk chocolate. Countries lined up on either side of the conflict based on the practices of their predominant chocolate manufacturer(s). Quality chocolate as defined by manufacturers and consumers is thus based on arguments concerning not just place identity, but national identity.

In the next section of this article we provide background on the literature from which we are drawing. We focus in particular on convention theory and its four-part framework for explaining the different ways in which quality is defined. In the third section we discuss the history of chocolate and chocolate manufacturing, with an eye towards explaining how innovation in the production process occurred across space. As the chocolate industry is notoriously secretive, making it impossible to obtain detailed information about methods and recipes directly from the manufacturers (Brenner, 2000), our information is drawn from secondary sources. Next, we explain how the European Chocolate War exemplifies the social construction of food quality from the manufacturers’ and consumers’ points of view. In the discussion section we show more explicitly how these aspects of chocolate and chocolate-making fit into the literature on food quality. By examining the history of chocolate production and the Chocolate War, we contribute to the literature on food quality by looking at how quality is socially constructed not in terms of the origin of raw materials (because the origin of cocoa beans is rarely an issue for the consumer in defining quality chocolate), but in terms of the method of processing those ingredients and the national histories of manufacturing.

2. Food quality

Collaboration between agricultural and economic geographers and rural sociologists has explored the relationships between nature, culture, and economy as exemplified in the agro-food industry. The definition of “quality” in particular shows the complicated ways in which social, economic, and ecological factors interact with each other. At various links in the commodity chain, producers, retailers, or consumers define quality (Fold, 2000). Those different definitions reverberate back and forth across the chain, changing the ways in which food is produced, marketed, and consumed. Therefore, different geographies of quality result depending on how and where quality is defined. Because of increasing consumer concern over where and how food is produced, as well as the unique biological characteristics of plant and animal products, it has been argued that the agro-food industry cannot be analyzed with the same political economy methods as other industries (e.g., Murdoch et al., 2000). Rather, attention needs to be paid to how ideas of quality are constructed based on social as well as biological characteristics, and how this differs across space and among different actors in the commodity chain (Mansfield, 2003c).

One particularly useful approach to analyzing quality in the agro-food industry has been French convention theory, which shows how different rules and norms apply at different points along the commodity chain according to different regimes (Murdoch et al., 2000; Fold, 2000; Daviron, 2002; Ponte and Gibbon, 2005). Convention theory argues that the rules and norms that govern economic transactions at various points along a commodity chain (or global value chain) are not pre-given, but emerge through interactions between various actors in the chain (Raikes et al., 2000; Ponte and Gibbon, 2005). Because these rules or regimes emerge through interaction, they are open to being challenged, though more powerful actors usually play a larger role in defining them. Each regime or “world” determines how quality is to be thought about, discussed, and defined: “there is no ‘universal’ understanding of quality...quality is cognitively evaluated in different ways depending on what ‘world’ is used to justify evaluation and action—and hence on which broader normative order is invoked” (Ponte and Gibbon, 2005, p. 7).

Research on food quality has explored four of these regimes. First, under the market-based regime, price is the determinant of quality: consumers prefer cheaper products (and manufacturers prefer cheaper raw materials). Second, the industry-based regime sees the standardization of physical characteristics as the most important factor in determining quality. Hygienic production or cleanliness is one of the most important variables used in industry-based regimes, as is regular size and shape for automatic processing or consumer aesthetics. Standardization by grade is a relatively new phenomenon, dating to 1925 for cocoa (Daviron, 2002). Struggles over the meaning of quality under this regime have to do with determining what physical charac-

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