



# The role of the Ark of Taste in promoting pinole, a Mexican heritage food



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 13 April 2015  
Received in revised form  
30 July 2015  
Accepted 2 October 2015  
Available online xxx

### Keywords:

Heritagisation of food  
Transmigration  
Corn  
Alternative geographies of food

## ABSTRACT

The heritagisation of food reveals the underlying processes by which various actors articulate a particular foodstuff as a heritage in an attempt at pursuing differing aims. Pinole, a Mexican traditional sweet, has recently been reconceptualised as 'heritage' by various actors across geographical levels: local Mexican farmers, transmigrant workers in Philadelphia, and the international food movement Slow Food. A multi-level analysis of the material fluxes and semiotic narratives emerging around the international diffusion of pinole reveal how these actors' interests can overlap as well as conflict.

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## 1. Introduction

Food historian Rachel Laudan writes of pinole that it 'gives me shivers up the spine. When I eat it or drink it, I am transported back through the millennia to travellers, warriors, muleteers' (Rachel Laudan, 2006 website). Pinole is a Mexican pre-Hispanic foodstuff<sup>1</sup> that strongly evokes the past. Made of toasted and ground kernels of corn with sugar, cinnamon or vanilla, it is usually prepared as a hot drink by adding water or milk and can also be eaten directly in its powdery form. Pinole was one of the main energy sources for the Aztecs and could be stored as emergency food for four or five years – in comparison to dried corn, which usually lasts for a year. During the Spanish conquest of Mesoamerica, Native Indians were documented to have shared pinole with stranded Spanish conquistadores on the brink of starvation (Pinole Weebly website).

Pinole is also associated with the diet and athleticism of the Tarahumara community of north-western Mexico, which is renowned for its long-distance runners. In 2012, pinole made from heirloom blue corn officially became an 'endangered flavour' and was entered into the Ark of Taste, an online catalogue of heritage foods selected and promoted by the global social

movement and organisation, Slow Food. In this instance, heritage foods are understood as 'the set of material and immaterial gastronomic elements linked to production, the agricultural sector and a collective regional heritage' (Bessièrè and Tibère, 2011 quoted in Bessièrè, 2013: 279). The Ark specifically sponsors pinole produced by Amigos de Ozolco, a cooperative in the small isolated village of San Mateo, Ozolco, in central Mexico. Slow Food's aim, along with Amigos', is to extract pinole from its 'ghostly existence on the edges of commerce' (Rachel Laudan, 2006 website) and transform it into an internationally celebrated and distributed heritage food.

Pinole's rediscovery as an international heritage food can be traced back to a group of Mexican transmigrant workers in the United States who sought to bring it from the 'edge of commerce' to a more central role in their lives as indigenous migrants, and in their hometown, as a profitable commodity. In so doing, they initiated a process of heritagisation, whereby 'the concept of cultural/immaterial patrimony is being applied to local foods in diverse ways and market circuits' (Grasseni, 2011). Pinole was thus valued as a typical pre-Hispanic indigenous heritage food produced in Ozolco and endorsed by Slow Food.

In comparing the discourse of local, trans-local and extra-local actors around pinole, issues emerge that underline the dynamics at work in the process of heritagisation. I adopt a meaning-centred and micro-level approach, framing my discussion within Bessièrè's theory (2013) on the 'construction of heritage' to investigate the discourse of actors amongst local, translocal and transnational

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<sup>1</sup> It can be prepared in different ways though it is usually made into a hot beverage.

organisations postulating pinole as a heritage food. In so doing, I seek to shed light onto the role of translocal<sup>2</sup> actors whilst challenging the habitual perspective that pits global actors against local actors (Bordi, 2006). Actors strategically *construct* the heritage of pinole and recontextualise the foodstuff in both time and place. Heritagisation emerges as a process that (i) enables a range of actors to assign new values to pinole by constructing narratives of the past; (ii) reinforces notions of peasant essentialism and its presumed values through nostalgia for pre-capitalist modes of production; and (iii) facilitates the appropriation of notions of authenticity and identity which promote the interests of various actors.

Literature on the heritagisation of food tends to dichotomise the interests of actors, between those of government, corporate or elite entities on one hand, and local or regional communities on the other (Finnis, 2012). Research on food systems, notably in development studies and geography, further investigates notions of sustainability and identity. Numerous scholars within anthropology, food studies, tourist industry and cultural studies have examined the role of the Slow Food movement as it reconfigures production methods and the very landscapes of the marginalised producers it claims to protect (Leitch, 2000, 2003; Lotti, 2009; MacDonald, 2013).

Though this article is grounded in place-specific data, its arguments speak to larger issues and concerns over capital expansion and the universalising effects of globalisation on the heterogeneous repertoire of local cultural meanings and practices. It seeks to redress the gap within this body of work to develop a deeper understanding of how the changing dynamics of capitalism drive global actors in promoting heritage foods with repercussions throughout the food system and, notably, for economically marginalised rural areas. I expand upon previous anthropological studies on globalisation, examining the demand for, and consumption of 'authentic Mexican' food driven by the nationalistic nostalgia of the displaced (Kearney, 1995; Bordi, 2006) and cultural geography, development studies and rural sociology on the role that transnational organisations such as Slow Food play in supporting and promoting the production of heritage foods (Leitch, 2003; Lotti, 2010; MacDonald, 2013). Using the heritagisation of pinole as a case study serves to scrutinise the complex and, at times, conflicting interests of the local and translocal actors whose livelihoods are tied up with the foodstuff. Mexican transmigrant workers emerge not as mere consumers, but as actors driving the construction and production of heritage food.

The first two sections of this article describe the research methods and situate the pinole case study within the academic body of literature on the heritagisation of food and the development of marginalised rural areas. The third section outlines the origins of the pinole project within two organisations: one set up by Mexican transmigrants in Philadelphia, and the other by farmers in Mexico. Jacinthe Bessière's concept of the 'construction of heritage' (2013), and her tripartite sequence of heritagisation, provides the lens through which to analyse these organisations and the role of Slow Food in process of constructing pinole into a heritage.

The following discussion underlines the normative claims in Slow Food's discourse on heritage products, as formulated through the Ark, and contributes to an understanding of Slow Food as a global heritagisation institution. The similarities and discrepancies

between the understandings of heritage food by local, translocal and the international organisations' are teased out throughout. The final section seeks to draw conclusions from the discussion and outline potential solutions to the issues that emerge between the interaction of global, local and translocal actors.

## 2. Methodology

This article is based on data collected throughout a broader multi-sited ethnographic study (Marcus, 1995) conducted in Turin, Italy; London, UK; Ozolco, Mexico; and Philadelphia, US. The choice of methodology was based on the belief that ethnography 'reveals the role of organizations, institutions, and networks, and the mechanisms of coordination and control, involved in this development' namely 'production and consumption' (Pratt, 2004: 125). Aware that '(A)cademic and ethnographic research has entered the sphere of the public domain, with discursive impact on local communities and their cultural expression, on ethnic and cultural identities, and eventually on heritage production at the local, national, and international level' (Kuutma, 2009: 8), I sought to investigate the aims of actors at different levels (local, translocal and international) in the process of heritage production and cultural policy-making. To this aim, I spent an aggregate of five months living with small-scale farmers in Ozolco, a small village on the slopes of the active volcano Popocatepetl in the Puebla region of Mexico between 2013 and 2014. During two weeks in June 2014, I also shadowed members of Blue Corn Alianza, an organisation linked to Amigos that sells pinole to an American clientele in South Philadelphia.

Over 30 in-depth interviews were carried out during this research, and enriched my notes from participant observation. Participants included the Ark of Taste commissioner, the founders and members of Amigos and Alianza, the leaders of Slow Food Mesoamerica, and Ozolcanian small-scale corn farmers. The ethnographic research was supplemented by grey literature, including the Alianza and Ark websites, brochures from all the organisations concerned, and reports by Mexican authorities and think tanks. The aim of my discussion with participants was to obtain the information and clarifications required to further understand the role and implications of the Ark and transnational food projects such as the pinole project, in articulating a global notion of gastronomic heritage. The second aim of these interviews and participant observation was to identify

the social actor or group (that) 'heritagises', selects, effects a classification and emphasises a value that no longer exists, in the context of a society that is anguished by the loss of its own remnants or heritage (Bessière, 2013: 277).

For Bessière, the initial identification of heritage goods emerges from the 'heritage realisation' of local actors (Bessière, 2013: 282). Heritagisation emerges most often from a 'situation where actors are confronted and distanced from one another' (Bessière, 2013: 283). These local actors first acknowledge and recognise a shared 'inherited conscience' that springs from familiarity and a common evaluation of the object under consideration (Bessière, 2013: 278) as well as a shared concern for a 'lost value' and the anxiety that springs from the loss of one's 'own traces' (1998: 28). Articulating food as heritage necessitates 'relational essence'. In other words, actors must share the knowledge and recognition, or the 'heritage awareness' that the food under consideration is of great importance (1998: 28). Actors then identify 'collective heritage objects', a process at the root of the construction of social value. Finally, the heritage in this food 'must be legitimized in order to be genuine' (1998: 28) This allows actors to articulate an identity and to

<sup>2</sup> In the context of this paper, translocal actors act and move across translocal geographies where 'simultaneous situatedness across different locales ... provide(s) ways of understanding the overlapping place-time(s) in migrants' everyday lives (Brickell and Datta, 2011: 4). Translocal actors are defined by their movement from one local to another rather than across national boundaries.

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