

The “Authentic” Blend: Experts Weigh in on Istrian Food

By: Daša Ličen

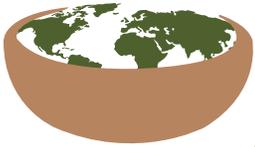
Abstract

This article examines the discourses and concepts of regional Istrian gourmet heroes, who bring into being and distribute ideas on what “authentic” Istrian cuisine is. Citizens of three different countries who speak four different languages, these experts consider themselves most of all Istrian and characterize Istrian foods as alternative foods in contrast to mainstream agro-industrial varieties. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this essay focuses on how these experts arbitrarily use adjectives such as “authentic,” “traditional,” “natural” and others in overlapping ways which I will show create obstacles to labelling the precise terminology of each. Ultimately I argue that these descriptors are all interchangeable in the experts’ discourse(s) on Istrian food, furthermore denoting Istrian food itself, although most of the time they absolutely do not mean the same. This mishmash is nowadays one of the main elements unifying the Istrian region as such, and while similarly present in many different places, Istria’s food movement is unique, because of its geographical and historical contexts.

Key terms: Istria, alternative foodways, experts, authenticity, region, Mediterranean diet.

Introduction

Experts like to put the word *Istrian* before the name of a recipe to denote that the dish belongs specifically to the Istrian region of Italy, Slovenia, and Croatia, or they use some other positive adjective to reconfirm the quality of the product. Dishes thus carry names such as “good homemade bread,”



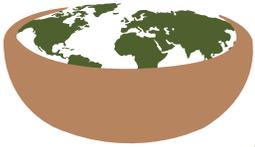
Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

which instantly make it better than ordinary “bread.” For example, at an event called Novigrad Scallop Evening (*Večer novigradske kapešante*), which occurs in Novigrad on Croatia’s Istrian coast, the term *kapešante* is used whenever organizers talk about scallops. But the term is in fact not Croatian, nor is it Slovene or Italian, the national languages one would expect to find on this peninsula; it exists only in the Istrian dialect. The organizers could of course have used other expressions for these shellfish, but opted for a regional term highlighting the Istrian character of these delicacies. This use of the term further implies that these are not just any scallops, but a particular scallop species that the inimitable Istrian waters produce. According to the organizers of the event, *kapešante* are also tasty and healthful, embodying the Istrian *genius loci*. They are allegedly even better when prepared with some Istrian olive oil and washed down with local wine. Novigrad’s parochialism thus does not seem to stand against the region, but is rather a part of it.

I have never been particularly curious about Istrian food, even though I grew up on the Istrian coast. To be honest, I only recall thinking more about it when I first started to travel in my teenage years and was every so often invited to international dinners. I was always asked to prepare a Slovenian dish. As I leafed through books and scrolled through internet pages, I realized there are apparently many Slovenian dishes I have never tasted. I thus decided to cook one that I would actually eat on a regular basis and then realized it was rather more Istrian than Slovenian, more regional than national.¹ The puzzle was intriguing enough for me to write my master’s thesis on the subject of what is Istrian food (Ličen 2015).

After my first ethnographic steps, I realized that in Istria particular connoisseurs can be discerned, I call them food experts, who play strong roles in an Istrian regional culinary movement and deserve special attention.² In my ethnographic study, which took place in Spring and Summer 2015, I thus attended culinary events all over the region, conducted around 15 in-depth interviews with these experts, talked to many more people, listened to the experts’ lectures, and in general tried to keep track of their culinary careers in any way possible. This article examines how these regional gourmet heroes articulate and disseminate ideas on what “authentic” Istrian cuisine is.³ Through public discourse(s), this social group uses its power to assert a strong influence

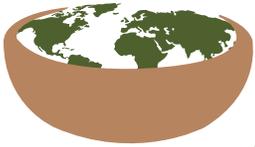


on the wider public's food-related thinking and actions (Van Dijk 1997).



Photo 1. Map of Istria shows adjacent nation-state jurisdictions and suggests the complexity of historical, cultural, and political influences. Original work by Markus Bernet is in the Public Domain courtesy of www.demis.nl (accessed April 2017 through Wikimedia Commons).

Istria, a peninsula in the northern Adriatic, is a region currently divided among three different countries—Croatia, Slovenia, and Italy—but it is one of those areas where systems of meaning do not necessarily correspond to national or ethnic or linguistic borders (Photo 1). More unity can be found within the geographical region of Istria than within each of the three nation states that divide it, and for that reason the region is a relevant framework for this study. The food experts I studied variably represent the three different countries and speak four different languages. But they consider themselves to be most of all Istrian, and they hold very similar attitudes about Istrian food. As a result of “modern accelerated dietary changes”⁴ the food discourse in the region has been transforming for at least the past 20 years. My research partners stand in opposition to “modernity” and “junk food” of the mainstream, and seek to



Digest

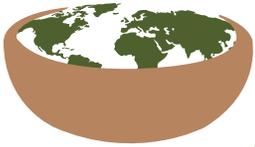
a journal of foodways & culture

reconnect local food producers with consumers as they believe occurred in the past. The alternative they advocate, however, represents a confusing mishmash of Istrian food discourses, as is clearly evident on a local TV show, for example.



Photo 2. Shooting the segment of “La barca dei sapori” with the hosts Marino and Martina Vocci; Anton Meden, local history expert; Gianfranco Abrami, photographer; and Klara and Drago Marić, local pasta manufacturers. The hosts in this particular segment emphasized that the ancient tradition of pasta does not stop at the Italian border, but that they make a high quality pasta also in the village of Canfanaro/Kanfanar in the very heart of Istria. Canfanaro/Kanfanar, 13 October 2014. Photo: Courtesy of Facebook profile of TV show [“La barca dei sapori”](#) (accessed 13 January 2017).

TV Capodistria, a Slovene public television station targeting the Istrian region and Italy’s neighboring Julian March, hosts a weekly show in which a ten-minute segment is devoted to local culinary traditions (Photo 2). The section *La barca dei sapori* (literally, “the boat of flavors”) is not limited exclusively to Istria, but mostly broadcasts from there. Each week the show’s team of local food experts heads to an “authentic” enough place where they introduce viewers to selected local traditions. As one of



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

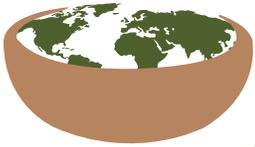
the host food experts whom I had recognized and interviewed put it:

. . . we seek to follow the seasons, we present what is seasonal, regional (*territorial*), typical. It would be hard to find a pineapple from the Maldives in our shows and traditions. We first research what's to be found in the place we visit, the dishes that were eaten a hundred years ago. . . . We've never been to McDonald's, you know.

Not only for the hosts of this show, but for Istrian food experts in general, long-established Istrian cuisine is a means for a person or an entire region to break free of all perceived unhealthy, overly modern, dangerous, fake, and artificial food practices, often symbolized by McDonald's, as mentioned above.

My case study draws from Jeff Pratt's (2007) work on alternative food movements and their over-simplification of the contrast between mainstream and alternative foodways. My article seeks to supplement Pratt's work modestly by examining a particular example of the synonymous use of unlike food qualities that is evident in the Istrian food experts' discourses. The regional gourmet experts I studied include chefs, cooks, journalists, writers, and festival organizers, who are considered to be knowledgeable when it comes to Istrian food. This article focuses on their arbitrary use of positive adjectives such as *authentic*, *traditional*, *natural*, and others, which I will elaborate and discuss in the following paragraphs. The interchangeable uses of these adjectives within the discourses on Istrian food create obstacles to defining the terms precisely and distinctly. Yet, at the end of the day, they merge under the "master-signifier" of Istrian food, where *authentic* is the most encompassing term, the kernel of the culinary discourses within Istria. My ethnographic experiences indeed proved that *authentic* frequently served as a code word for all the other positive adjectives ascribed to Istrian food. "Authenticity" is then a sort of Moebius strip on which all the terms endlessly overlap but have one broader meaning, namely, the "splendid" assortment of Istrian culinary characteristics.

To address food experts' attempts to immortalize something as perishable as food and to establish it as an authentic mixture, I will introduce



Digest

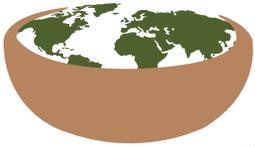
a journal of foodways & culture

the Istrian food “cocktail” by briefly discussing key terms—*authentic, traditional, healthy, ecological, organic, alternative market*—their referents, the nuances of Istrian food discourses, and some theoretical perspective. As this *mélange* of positive terms and concepts builds on the rhetorical opposition between mainstream agro-industrial food markets and alternative food movements, I will bracket my discussion between the two oppositional contexts, beginning first with perceptions of the mainstream food system, and contemplating alternative food movements at the end.

The Mainstream Food System

The Industrial Revolution did not take place in an instant, nor was it unrelated to previous historical events, yet this revolution signifies a break between the traditional and the modern, a transformation of a structure (Sewell 2005). The transition to new manufacturing processes is connected to other fundamental changes—above all, a profound transformation of human lives, not necessarily for the worse. In the eyes of my research partners, machines changed the existing natural order—more specifically, they spoiled it. For the past two centuries, according to my collocutors, all things food have only been going downhill, as have other matters in general, all in the shadow of the mainstream agro-industrial food system. The alternative movements, among which I also classify the Istrian food initiative, have supposedly been addressing a number of recent or less recent interconnected processes, which the English anthropologist Jeff Pratt draws attention to: the farming revolution, the development of the global foodstuffs market, transnational corporations in the food chain, supermarket chains, and consumption changes (Pratt 2007: 286).

These processes consequently generated worries about the environment: the fate of small farmers, the direction of global trade relations, the rise of corporate power throughout food chains, and food quality (Pratt 2007:287). Social movements such as Istrians fighting for measures related to these changes promote an alternative food system in contrast to the mainstream one. The polarized view of the alternative movements can be described in a nutshell as the opposition between good and bad, or right and wrong. In the romantic landscape of food, the terms *traditional, eternal, slow,*



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

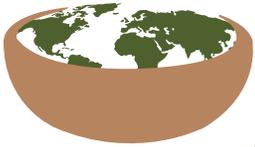
authentic, and *original* usually overlap with *organic*, *local*, and even *ecological*. Pratt states that these are not the same, and analyzes how these discourses intersect in a mix contrasting with the global agro-industrial food complex (Pratt 2007, also Debevec and Tivadar 2006, Rogelja 2006).

While there are about a dozen positive adjectives that my research partners associate with Istrian food, I have chosen to examine those that are more evocative and that stress various aspects ascribed to Istrian food. These are key to understanding what Istrian food is in the eyes of the experts. When put together, these adjectives are not cohesive, but do represent a coherent entity at first glance. The qualities reflected in these terms are an important and revealing part of the modern Istrian food movement, which on the one hand represents merely one of the many alternative answers to global changes, yet is, on the other hand, due to the region's particular historical frame, also a unique one. Until 1991 when Slovenia split from Yugoslavia, the Istrian peninsula has for centuries been a part of the same, although rapidly changing, state formations (Darovec 2009).⁵

Authentic

Authenticity (in the local languages, *autenticità*, *avtentičnost*, *autentičnost*) is the most encompassing term, and it is commonly adopted as a code word for the blend of Istrian food. The authentic stands against the mainstream, which one of my willful collocutors aimed to prove by entering her bread in a Slovenia-wide food fair. She was awarded the maximum points in all possible categories except for form. She knew which form was required of the competitors, but nonetheless made a *biga*—an “authentic” Istrian loaf—just to prove her point.⁶

Notions of authenticity, like those I have just outlined, are extremely widespread. They are often fused with notions of the genuine, real, or true, establishing themselves against the inauthentic and fake (Bendix 1997, Fillitz and Saris 2012). The meaning of *authenticity* shifts from one context to another, but implies something true, original, good, and a plethora of other affirmative expressions. It seems to be a more powerful and broader expression than, say, *traditional* or *ecological*, and it is generally preferred over these latter two adjectives, which are stricter in their meanings.

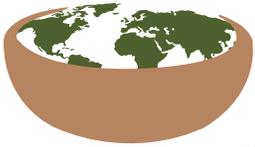


Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Istrian food experts find the source of food authenticity in two areas: natural and cultural.⁷ My interlocutors seek to situate Istrian authentic food in the sphere of the natural, and they speak about the unique flora and fauna of Istria as the reason for this. Istria is referred to as the northernmost part of the Mediterranean where olive trees grow,⁸ with the implication that Istria has an exclusive location, supposedly the reason for the above-average quality of the locally produced oil (Ogrin 2004). Experts are proud of other products too, such as the truffle, portrayed as the king of cuisine, and wild asparagus, which rank high on the imagined scale of quality foodstuffs. In comparison with more central European regions near Istria, Istria's typically Mediterranean goods, such as olive oil, wine, or tomato, are considered distinctive because of their production in Croatia's and Slovenia's littoral zones, where the continental past and present intersect with the Mediterranean (e.g. Rihtman Avguštin 2001, Godina Golija 2006).

Fulvio Tomizza, an *esulo*⁹ and a renowned writer who recounted stories predominantly about his native Istria, used to claim that Istria, despite its smallness, is a microcosm where "everything" can be found, at least according to his aficionados among the culinary experts. The implication is that Istria offers an excellently balanced range of foodstuffs. While Istrian products are supposed to be rare, however, they are also considered the best of their kind. The food experts boil the quality of foodstuffs down to geography and climate, which are responsible for the best truffles, wine, olive oil, asparagus, fish, and other foods. One of the many food festivals, for example, promotes the delicious pilchards caught in the delta of the Mirna River, where saltwater and freshwater meet, supposedly resulting in the superior quality of the fish. The seemingly scientific explanations are of course very useful when seeking to authenticate a product. Biological components of the environment thus bestow uniqueness and authenticity on a place's products, prohibiting them from being replicated elsewhere. The common criticism of the "fake" Chinese truffles that can be heard among the experts is an example of such fear of food pirating (Photo 3).



Digest

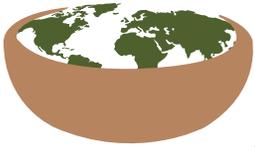
a journal of foodways & culture



Photo 3. Grilled ricotta with truffles served author by interviewee Sandi Tripar, owner of a truffle restaurant. Belvedur, 29 May 2015. Photo: Daša Ličen.

One of my research partners, a chef who owns his own catering business and presents Istrian cuisine internationally,¹⁰ explained to me how it is precisely nature that supplies authenticity and singularity to Istria's homemade products:

There are ideas that are born spontaneously; for instance, pears with rosemary. I have three old [pear] trees, my grandfather already had them, and under them we planted a few decorative rosemary bushes, and when I passed by—and these pears were ripe, they were falling on the rosemary bushes—I found the smell incredibly nice, and said, wait a minute, why not try it, and I tried one batch, and it was really good I wanted to do more and tried with other pears No, that wasn't it.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

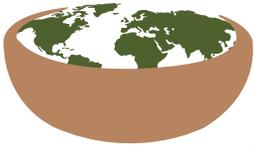
You know, there needs to be exactly that variety, apparently it was also ripe to perfection, as well as the rosemary, and so the combination was a really fortunate one because when I tried it with other pears it wasn't right anymore.

Authenticity, according to conventional beliefs, also emerges out of Istria's culture. Although Istria's goods are valuable, they are apparently not plentiful. The locals talk of *cucina povera* "poor cuisine," not in the sense of nutritional value, but in the limited variety and availability of foodstuffs. Because of the immense creativity of local women, however, housewives were able to build up a rich tradition despite the limited repertoire and quantities of foodstuffs. They also needed to cook depending on the season (*štajon*), yet another link to nature, according to my Istrian culinary experts. People should eat what Istrian soil provides but, even more, *when* it provides it. Such food is then rich in taste, environmentally friendly, and healthy, at least according to my research partners.

All this "authenticity" could be summarized by the concept of *terroir*, which has changed, or rather expanded, in the past few decades. At first it meant only the environmental and geographical characteristics that give individual foodstuffs their taste, but now it also includes the human factors of the area and, most recently, the aura of genuineness and authenticity that only a specific *terroir* can provide (Demossier 2011). *Terroir*, the taste of a place, links socio-cultural heritage claims with special natural features in producing goods with a special aura. Istrian cuisine is then one of the special places where culture, the artisanal cultivation, merges with nature. As much as *terroir* promotes a local landscape in a pan, it is really oriented outside of the local in its visibility at festivals that attract visitors from various places and "export" "authenticated" local cultural resources to a broader national and international audience.

Traditional

While the Istrian culinary experts do not see much difference between *traditional* and *authenticity*, scholars do. The notion of *traditional* primarily within the analyzed discourses aims at providing a dish or a foodstuff with



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

a timeless lineage. Ethnologists used to, and some still do, enjoy making inventories of traditions of a past that is disappearing or has already vanished (Fikfak 2008:38).¹¹ Many have seen the “traditional” past as static, rarely mentioning that traditional practices did not exist as such from the beginning of time. Many have, however, surpassed the Herderian spirit and deconstructed such historicist “returns to Eden,” chiefly through denoting everything as folklorism—which again some scholars have abandoned because there is no clear line between folklore and folklorism. Nor is there a clear line between kitsch and tastefulness.¹² “Only the sensibility and experience of those who do serious work on the subject can define the limits of history and romance properly, even if precariously” (Montanari 2006:67). My goal in this section is not simply to deconstruct invented traditions (Hobsbawm 2006)—because, after all, an invented tradition is still a tradition—but to show their role as relevant for the Istrian food discourses.

According to Gérard Lenclud, *tradition* is mainly defined as having one or all of the following features: being a vestige from the past, referring to non-written customs, and defining cultural facts as important (not just any cultural facts; Lenclud 1987:9). Henry Glassie (1995) would add that tradition is a temporal concern, always intertwined with the past, but open to endless revision. Continuity and not stasis is in tradition’s character. In the case of Istrian food experts, the regional past is seen as static and flawlessly perfect, and Istrian food is too. My research partners believe that people in former times lived carefree because their only worry was “whether or not their cow was pregnant.” Besides that, their food was homegrown and healthy, unlike today’s “artificial” food, when “you do not even know what they put inside.” In my interlocutors’ opinions, all the significant Istrian foodstuffs and dishes have *always* been present and ought to remain a part of this region.

Although it is somehow easy to believe wine production is an ancient activity in Istria, it is harder to claim this for truffle hunting, but let me give you an idea how the experts “traditionalize” truffles. Many of my field experts had no trouble declaring truffles to be traditionally Istrian. The chef who, at the moment, probably prepares more truffles than any other in Istria told me:

They were not made up yesterday. There exist centuries-old



Digest

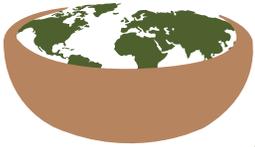
a journal of foodways & culture

records of people going out and hunting truffles with dogs. People were hungry and tried truffles; they had no taste when cold, so they warmed them and the aroma developed.

In fact, until recently, these nowadays expensive delicacies were considered to be merely “stinking potatoes” that pigs would eat. In Istria, truffles started being collected only in the late 1920s, but to be sold to Italians (Ledinek Lozej and Rogelja 2000:93). They were invented as traditional much later, in the 1990s, when they became a symbol of Istrian gastronomic identity (Kocković 2014:53). An old Arab proverb says that a man is more similar to his time than to his father’s time, which in a nutshell explains the story about truffles’ timeless history. Italians have likewise naturalized the tomato and have largely forgotten its origins in the Americas. Similarly, Istrians, and most of Europe, have forgotten corn or polenta’s roots in the Americas. By moving an item or a dish from the world of authenticity to the world of multiple copying, the “original” recipes, ingredients, and tools have been “relocated, renamed and introduced to a new system of representations” (Billiard 2006:123).

Two food items that reveal experts’ perspectives on tradition appeared in every single interview I carried out; the first one was *polenta*, which used to be a substitute for bread in less affluent Istrian households.¹³ For my research partners, polenta, boiled cornmeal, is a link to everything from the recent past, whereas by contrast, the second food item, rolled kebabs known as *čevapčići*, “the intruders,” are the symbol of all that is alien, new, and foreign. Grilled *čevapčići* come from the Balkans and are infecting the formerly “pure” Istrian cuisine, not only symbolically but also with their odor, which my interviewees complained about.¹⁴ *Čevapčići* became rooted in Istria during the Yugoslav era, but are now more connected to the Other—namely, to Bosnians living in the Istrian peninsula, and to all undesired immigrants from elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia.¹⁵

Interestingly enough, *čevapčići* originate from Ottoman cuisine and can be considered a Mediterranean dish. Mirjana Randić (2006:38) says Turkish or Balkan cuisines are typically not regarded as Mediterranean, however, but as rather different entities (Randić 2006:38): What is considered part of Greek traditional cuisine and what is considered Turkish chiefly differs in only a letter or two of the name, revealing that tradition is not



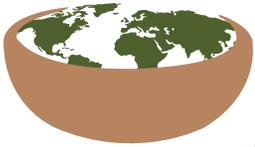
Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

only about food itself, but also about the wider social context. Similarly to *čevapčići*, ethnic food establishments in Sardinia are seen to intrude into the authentic scene. According to Carole Counihan's 2014 study, inhabitants explained "foreign" ethnic food establishments' lack of rootedness in the land for the Sardinian old towns' restrictions on them.

Old and traditional are superlative, from the viewpoint of the culinary experts, but what I noticed during my fieldwork is that the oldest and most original are often mixed with the modern—yet not just any modern. In Istria, *čevapčići* are new in comparison to polenta, but not fresh enough to be a real modern element that can fashionably complement the traditional. One of the festivals I studied promotes itself with this telling quote, "incredibly healthy, nutritious, tasty, and affordable, pilchards have fed generations of Mediterranean families, and now they return to the table in a number of *imaginative combinations*." In Istria, at least a dozen haute cuisine restaurants consider themselves principally Istrian; they fit the idea of traditional perfectly, but add a pinch of innovation to their menus. A *chef de cuisine* whom I talked to is, for instance, renowned for his "molecular" minestrone (also known locally as *mineštra* or *maneštra*), which consists of different, as he put it, "rounded spheres," which the customer then mixes on his or her own. "Istrian sushi" is what another prestigious restaurant serves its customers; in the same artistic manner, several other Istrian chefs concoct unusual dishes that journalists then praise to the wider public. Following novel gastronomic trends is generally part of a more urban Istrian cuisine, yet is not rejected by the wider expert community I conducted interviews with. Not all of the experts implement new vogues though, and so there is a boundary between the more peasant rural cuisine (known as *konoba*) and "haute traditional cuisine" (Sammells 2014:142), but the groups do not challenge each other.

Clare Sammells came up with the phrase *haute traditional cuisines* as bridging the gap between geographic localism and globalizing cosmopolitanism. They move between two extremes, claiming legitimacy both as heritage and as global elite commodities (Sammells 2014:142–143). The Slovenian ethnologist Maja Godina Golija also talks of traditional food being in balance with innovation, but does not give it a special name (2012:100). Polenta was, for instance, one of the foodstuffs Istrian experts selected from the past, but since it has also become popular around the globe at about the same time, it is therefore



Digest

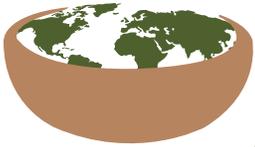
a journal of foodways & culture

considered very traditional (of course, only when cooked from scratch) and is simultaneously hip, appealing to the tastes of cosmopolitan “foodies.” Regina Bendix (1997) talks more generally about this paradox: the combination of the fossilized and dynamic. The modern elements should not be mistaken for suggesting that cooking is a constantly evolving practice, because they are thought of as just entering and leaving the picture without changing it, in the experts’ opinions. The combination of modernity and traditional has a lot to do with the fetishization of authenticity, and the market itself, to which I turn later.

The present shapes the past and irrefutably claims sets of goods and practices as traditional, which Di Giovine and Brulotte (2014) call “goods heritage.” Indeed an increasing number of institutions, including the European Union and UNESCO,¹⁶ are creating *terroir* designations for various regions, countries, or even wider units. The earliest stem from the Italian wine industry—DOC, or *denominazione di origine controllata* (controlled designation of origin)—and require that specific wines be produced in a specific well-defined region, according to traditional knowhow. While these designations serve openly to honor particular foods and food complexes, they also add value to them, especially for export and marketing, while offering protection from copycat products. These larger geographical marketing trends are for now rather absent in the Mediterranean diet’s micro-region of the Istrian peninsula, but more local, less formally applied designations of origin aim to protect Istrian foods’ reputation as traditional.

Healthy

What is healthy and what is not can obviously not be clearly separated, yet the idea among the Istrian culinary experts is that healthy food has to be prepared from scratch, and it is absolutely not prepackaged, unless one prepared it oneself beforehand. This tenet that quality comes from homemade products goes hand in hand with the aim to construct a morally right local economy separated from the capitalist system (Pratt 2007:288). Healthy food must also contain as few foodstuffs from outside the region as possible, partly because the Mediterranean context lends excellent support to the idea that home-made foods using local Istrian foodstuffs are both healthy and environmentally sound.



Digest

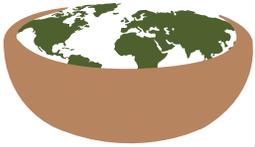
a journal of foodways & culture

Part of the reasoning here is that the Istrian diet is seen to represent a version of “the Mediterranean diet”—a relatively new metaphorical abstraction (Baskar and Krese 1993)—which is proclaimed to be the healthiest in the world due to the ancient wisdom of the region’s inhabitants.¹⁷ According to my culinary experts, Istrian food is claimed to be the healthiest of all. Good nutritional and longevity benefits bestowed by olive oil, fresh fruits and vegetables, seafood, wine, and certain grains (Di Giovine and Brulotte 2014:13) have been correlated with a lower incidence of cardiovascular diseases. Ancel B. Keys especially promoted this idea, encouraging Americans, in his case, to adopt more rational dietary habits (Keys and Keys 1959). As the diet gained widespread international recognition in the 1960s and 1970s, the promotion of olive oil in particular increased its production (Billiard 2006:118).

In Istrian cuisine, olive oil, the cornerstone of the Mediterranean diet, is a pivotal ingredient; it is absolutely always present, chefs pour it over everything, make it available on every table, and sell it. Defenders of Istrian food, trapped in their desire to convert a fatty cuisine into a healthy dietary and trendy Mediterranean one, have accordingly ignored parts of their culinary heritage, such as use of lard, which is however still very much alive “among simple people.” This amiable placement of Istrian cuisine within the Mediterranean nutritional model was definitely one of the factors contributing to the blossoming of Istrian culinary experts.

Besides olive oil, also truffles are ordinarily accentuated as good for health. Istrian connoisseurs of truffles are convinced that truffles are a good source of protein, work as an aphrodisiac and are in general very salubrious. One of the “truffle kings” said of his catering team: “They never even sneeze! I am sure it is because of the truffle consumption; I suppose it affects the immune system. This would be worth checking and I hope some scientists will study it.” To give the healthiness of Istrian food more scientific backing at the local level, food experts organizing festivals regularly invite nutritionists or even doctors to lecture on a certain foodstuff, or on Istrian cuisine in general.

Even though the experts see Istrian cuisine as a particular fragment of the Mediterranean diet, they typically do not link it to its healthiness, but rather to tradition. Since retirement, one of the cooks I interviewed has begun to



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

promote Istrian food as healthy, lecturing on the subject. She told how once, when readying a lecture for schoolchildren, she woke up very early to fry fritters (known in Istria as *fritule*¹⁸) because she wanted the children to have a good snack and not “industrially” prepared waffles. One does not need great insight to see that the difference in health benefits between the two is not tremendous. But according to her, whether or not a dish was “homemade” (traditional) made a substantial difference and could replace the role of a doctor. Another research partner confirmed this idea in a story about *crostata* he recently ate:

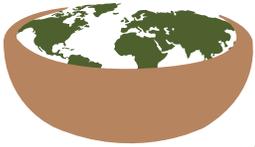
Deep frozen, thawed, an Italian trick, there are only poisons inside, especially for us who are a bit older, it is cholesterol, isn't it? When you make a *crostata* at home it is completely different. Okay, it has sugar and is a little bit fattening, but besides that, in my opinion it is not so harmful. . . . Then I found out it was microwaved, some Italian Tre Marie, *mamma mia*, I saw a truck delivering them, *blah*, get this away from me.

So Istrian cuisine is claimed to be healthy not only because of its Mediterranean basis but also because of its home, local and ecological production, which is traditional, and, last but not least, authentic. One again sees that each of the adjectives describing Istrian food can immediately be linked to all the others.

Ecological and Organic

How many kilometers did that avocado travel before it ended up on the shelf of the grocery store? Were the hens allowed to roam around freely before they laid their eggs? Trendy questions of this kind are relevant for Istrian food discourses and the typically ecological and organic answers to them contain moral values, as do notions of what makes “healthy” foods.

The supposedly most poisonous foods are those produced or transported by huge companies because “you never know what's inside.” Istrian food stands for exactly the opposite of the “toxic global.” Ecological and organic are innate to Istrian food, at least according to my interlocutors. When I asked the culinary experts about their notions of



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

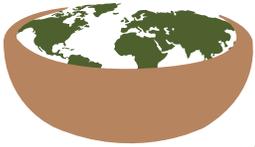
ecological and/or organic, they were not only supportive of them, but found them to be integrated in their practices of Istrian cuisine.

Most of my research partners have a farm, or at least a garden, where “everything is organic.” Yet when asked about certifications, they noted how extremely complicated it is to obtain one, and how time-consuming it is to endure certifier visits that may be as often as once per week. Some claimed they do not need the certification, and another mentioned his fear of obtaining it because his neighbor surely uses pesticides and other chemicals that could be determined to infect his crop. Yet another questioned the reliability of certification because sometimes rain carries air-borne poisons that contaminate the soil. Violations of certification also can result in stiff penalties from ecological or organic agricultural supervisors, so the farmers’ apprehensions are not completely out of place.

In the experts’ eyes, almost everything in Istria that grows, swims, or grazes, even if habitually not certified, may be considered biological, ecological, or organic in some respects. They also find wild organisms that prosper without human intervention, such as asparagus and truffles, the most purely “natural.” By extension, eating natural, ecological, green, and organic Istrian food symbolizes cooling down the “overheated” (Eriksen 2016) planet that the mainstream agro-industrial food system produces, although these actions in point of fact do not ameliorate the challenging environmental issues we all are facing.

The Alternative Market

It is presumed among the Istrian food experts that authentic food is a part of an alternative market, which stands against global foodways that homogenize not only food itself, but the experience of consuming, as well as the imaginaries of the alimentary culture that relates to consumption (Di Giovine and Brulotte 2014, Wilk 2006, Pratt 2007). Even though Istrians have adopted what I exaggeratedly call a *Blut und Boden* ideology when it comes to food, their political aspirations are presented as rather leftist. When the Slow Food movement was founded in Bra in 1986, it was similarly politically oriented to



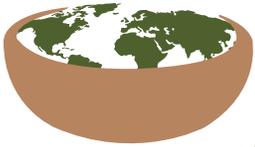
Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

the left. Carlo Petrini, the founder of Slow Food, originally established it to prevent a new McDonald's restaurant from opening in Rome and, most of all, more broadly attempted to reconnect producers with consumers. One of the parallels between Slow Food and Istrian food activism is promoting social and economic justice through the food system, even though Slow Food has been drifting increasingly to the right since then (Paxson 2005). However, while the left-wing aspirations of Istrian experts sometimes appear a bit phony, still their general idea is to increase local production, provide fair pay to Istrians, and to turn their backs on Starbucks cafés around the planet.

Experts typically told me that their culinary endeavors are not connected to money, but are almost charitable acts. The organizer of an artichoke festival kept telling me how much hard work coordination of a festival demands. He does not get paid for any of his activity; what he does is a result of his own good will because he believes in what he does in the dissemination of local, natural, and high-quality products. The organizer of the artichoke festival is not acting merely as the head of the village tourist association, but in fact also as the biggest local retailer of artichokes, and he has been the head of the festival from its very beginning. A quick internet search, for example, revealed that up to 30% of his yearly harvest of artichokes is sold at this particular festival, which makes his statement about the meaninglessness of money very questionable.

The Slovene “truffle king”—as the media have dubbed him, and which he does not hesitate to make use of himself—operates similarly. In his and other experts' opinions, the poisonous food brought from far away should be replaced with the local seasonal products. It would hinder the huge companies from abroad that interfere with traditional routines and would decrease inequality. The truffle expert is even a member of a quite radical, but not very successful, local left-wing political party, and within it he fights for the revitalization of the countryside, but simultaneously promotes his restaurant at shopping malls, where he sets up a stall, cooks truffle dishes, and sells the expensive products that he and his parents make at home. The “truffle king” seems to be trying to rule two kingdoms, the authentic as well as the inauthentic one, and there seem to be more such emperors. Pratt (2007), however, denies that there are strong boundaries between the mainstream and the alternative market; they are in fact quite porous, which my conclusion explores in greater detail.



Digest

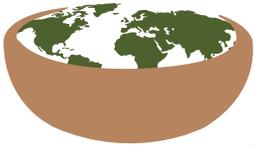
a journal of foodways & culture

Conclusion

The message of this article concerns the idea of “authentic” Istrian food, which, in the eyes of my research partners, cannot be distinguished from the “traditional,” “ecological,” “organic,” “healthy,” or “alternative market.” My goal was to illuminate a discourse, which chiefly recognizes Istrian food as a mixture of different positive qualities and simply good. It claims to establish Istrian cuisine against the mainstream agro-industrial market and thus as ultimately alternative.

Let me summarize the aforementioned qualities that are commonly and interchangeably ascribed to Istrian food. According to the experts, Istrian regional food gets its “authenticity” from local nature, on the one hand, and Istrian culture, on the other. They portray Istrian dishes as thus embodying both, giving a “true taste of Istria itself.” “Tradition,” another quality that brands Istrian cuisine, implies that Istrian food identity was inscribed in the heavens, and is for that reason eternal and fixed. What gives this regional cuisine its “healthiness” is commonly precisely tradition, as stated by the interviewed experts, but even more often “healthiness” is considered to be due to Istria’s representation of the Mediterranean diet. Istrian food is in addition also supposed to be “ecological” and “organic”—which experts plainly explain as resulting from local production—because whatever grows on Istrian soil or in its waters sprouted in an ecological and organic environment, unlike most of the other foodstuffs that are supposedly produced artificially—far away and in factories. Last, but not least, I touched upon the common notion that Istrian food is a part of an “alternative economy” operating in the alternative market, in contrast to the mainstream one that is frequently characterized by agro-industrial food production and distribution, and global capitalist companies such as McDonald’s.

These diverse qualities reinforce one another and are used interchangeably even if they do not mean the same thing. Experts’ discourses should therefore be taken with a grain of salt because “the totalizing character of these discourses hides the fact that the different qualities evoked for alternative foods do not in fact entail each other, and may pull in different directions” (Pratt 2007:285).



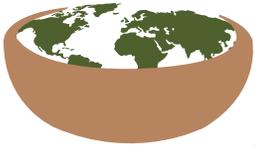
Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

The analyzed experts mesh these qualities together and through them promote an important opposition: they perceive food as being either mainstream, thus industrial, global, and bad, or alternative, in their case Istrian, thus healthy, traditional, ecological, authentic, and more. A universe where all of the negative qualities reside stands against one where all the positive can be found.

The experts thus neglect many essential contrasts between the above-mentioned qualities and see them as contrasting with the global or mainstream food system. Yet these experts are, according to Pratt's words, not the only ones who share this common rhetorical dialectic between the alternative and the mainstream agro-food markets in contemporary times (Pratt 2007). On the other hand, perhaps we should admire these experts for promoting "authentic" Istrian cuisine. Although lacking some meticulousness, they, on the bright side, correctly detect many problematic symptoms of global food trends and are actively seeking to address them in a variety of ways. They note, for example, that recommendations to eat autochthonous fish regularly combined with frequent offerings to tourists, in fact contribute to worsening the already high level of overfishing present in the Adriatic Sea.

How people eat, where they eat, whom they eat with, and when they eat varies uniquely from place to place, but I contend that regions are the focal unities of a certain food coherence, like the one that my experts seek to articulate and trace to Istria's historical and cultural past. Cuisine is a rather larger culinary structure that makes meals make sense, which seems much more easily ascribed to Istria than to a greater nation-state entity like Slovenia or for that matter any other. I did not set out to determine whether or not there is a culinary tradition that joins together the whole Istrian peninsula, and in this manner answer if there really is something called Istrian cuisine. Rather, I studied the people who are positive such cuisine exists and continues to endure, although threatened. Whilst the geographical and historical unity of the region inspires confidence that there used to be such a thing as Istrian cuisine, my aim was to ascertain to what extent it exists as such nowadays and how. Both the perceived reality and continuity of this cuisine could be due, to a great extent, to the influence of the culinary experts I researched. They are sure Istrian cuisine was and remains homogeneous, they believe in the gastronomic unity of the region and, in a consistent folk rhetoric, they spread



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

almost identical although inconsistent ideas on what Istrian food is or is not. They, at the end of the day, are the ones making the modern discussion of the existence of Istrian food even possible.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the culinary experts for allowing me to enter their daily lives and learn about their passionate advocacy for Istrian foods. I also thank Janet C. Gilmore for her editorial help with this essay.

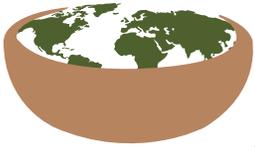
Notes

(1) On this occasion, I prepared polenta—a dish of boiled cornmeal, usually consumed hot as a porridge. It has for centuries been a staple food of the regions now representing the north of Italy, but the nearby Mediterranean regions such as Istria know it too. Polenta can nowadays be found also in central Slovenia, but mainly due to the fact it entered a new golden age and is now perceived as one of the more glamorous dishes.

(2) More on them and their taste can be found in my article, “The Fine and the Tasteless. Istrian Culinary Experts and Taste ” (2015).

(3) For the sake of allowing readers to reflect more readily on some data that were collected through fieldwork, I reproduce testimony without constantly using quotes and citations. But these may be found in my field materials and master’s thesis.

(4) In his article “Food Values” (2007, 286-287) the anthropologist Jeff Pratt sheds light on a number of processes that brought along the agro-industrial food system as we know it. More on that in the continuation of this paper.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

(5) In the late 18th century, when the Venetian Republic fell, Istria became a part of the Habsburg Monarchy. After its occupation by Napoleon in the early 19th century, it returned to Habsburg rule until World War I. Between the two world wars, it belonged to Italy; after World War II, to Yugoslavia; and then in the early 1990s, it was split between the newly established republics of Slovenia and Croatia.

(6) *Biga* has different meanings, but in this case stands for a kind of loaf that looks like a set of buns holding together very tightly. One can then easily pull the buns apart and avoid cutting the bread.

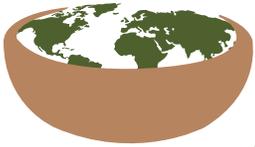
(7) There are clear parallels between nature and geography and between culture and history, but I as an anthropologist prefer to avoid the nature-culture division, unless in this case when I stick to the terms my collocutors like to use.

(8) Although Istria is very proud of its olive oil, there are in fact parts of Istria where there is no olive oil production, because olive trees actually do not grow above about 250 meters in elevation.

(9) Thousands of mostly Italian individuals known as *esuli* left Istria after World War II, when these areas became a part of Yugoslavia, and settled in Italy. Tomizza was among them.

(10) He performed twice at Milan's 2015 Expo, where he represented Istrian cuisine.

(11) Slovene ethnology did not bother much about food until Rajko Ložar's extensive study on food in 1944, in which he warned ethnologists against simply collecting and publishing recipes. The real upswing in food studies appeared in the mid-1990s, and since then a growing number of articles and exhibitions have been devoted to the topic. Credit especially goes to Maja Godina Golija, but food is still insufficiently researched, which she also states (Godina Golija 2012:94).



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

(12) Some academic attempts to protect traditional festivals from kitsch are surprisingly very recent. Katja Hrobat Virloget offers guidelines on how festivals (called *sagre* or *šagre* in Istria) should be conducted today (Hrobat Virloget 2012). At times, her suggestions seem a bit like battling windmills because her advice, although sensible, will probably not change the existing tradition.

(13) In the past, polenta was a “dish for the indisposed;” that is, it was simple, economical, and had no added spices, and so it was the prototype for a lower-class diet (Montanari 2006:39). Ledinek Lozej also mentions polenta as a bread substitute in the Vipava Valley in the Slovenian Littoral (2015:105).

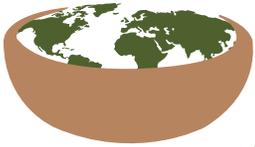
(14) Most culinary experts also complain about non-local music that is played at the festivals; however, local alternatives are few.

(15) Migrants from various other parts of the former Yugoslavia are, at least in Slovenian Istria, intriguingly simply referred to as “Bosnians.”

(16) Since 2010, for instance, the Mediterranean diet has been part of UNESCO’s List of Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

(17) Although some argue that its healthiness in fact results from poverty (Baskar and Krese 1993).

(18) Fritters are a good case of showing how it is in food’s character to change and ignore the regional or national borders. For instance, the Dalmatian region considers fritters to be theirs, and Slovenia too, but under another name: *miške*.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

References Cited

Bendix, Regina. 1997. *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Berlant, Lauren. 2010. Risky Bigness: On Obesity, Eating, and the Ambiguity of Health. In *Against Health*, ed. Jonathan Metzl, et al., 26-39. New York: New York University Press.

Billiard, Elise. 2006. When Tradition Becomes Trendy: Social Distinction in Maltese Food Culture. *Anthropological Notebooks* 12 (1): 113-126.

Bobrow-Strain, Aaron. 2012. *White Bread: A Social History of a Store-Bought Loaf*. Boston: Beacon Press.

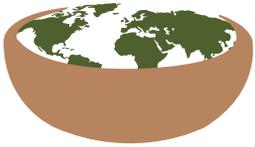
Counihan, Carole. 2014. Cultural Heritage in Food Activism: Local and Global Tensions. In *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage*, ed. Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael A. Di Giovine, 219-230. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.

Darovec, Darko. 2009. *Kratka zgodovina Istre*. Koper: Založba Annales.

Debevec, Liza and Tivadar, Blanka. 2006. Making Connections through Foodways: Contemporary Issues in Anthropological and Sociological Studies of Food. *Anthropological Notebooks* 12 (1): 5-16.

Demossier, Marion. 2011. Beyond *Terroir*: Territorial Construction, Hegemonic Discourses, and French Wine Culture. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 17: 685-705.

Di Giovine, Michael and Ronda Brulotte. 2014. Introduction: Food and Foodways as Cultural Heritage. In *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage*, ed. Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael A. Di Giovine, 1-27. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2016. *Overheating. An Anthropology of Accelerated Change*. London: Pluto Press.

Fikfak, Jurij. 2008. Med delom in celoto. Nekatera vprašanja etnološkega raziskovanja in reprezentacije. *Traditiones* 37 (2): 27-43.

Fillitz, Thomas and Jamie Saris. 2015. Introduction Authenticity Aujourd'hui. In *Debating Authenticity: Concepts of Modernity in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Thomas Fillitz and A. Jamie Saris, 1-24. New York: Berghahn.

Glassie, Henry. 1995. Tradition. *Journal of American Folklore* 108 (430): 395-412.

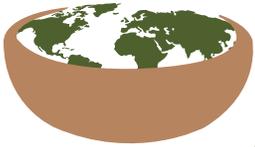
Godina Golija, Maja. 2006. The Influence of Mediterranean Food in Slovenian Food Habits. In *Mediterranean Food: Concepts and Trends: Proceedings of the 15th International Ethnological Food Research Conference, Dubrovnik, 27 September-3 October, 2004*, ed. Patricia Lysaght, with Nives Rittig-Beljak, 65-74. Zagreb: Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in association with the Ethnographic Museum.

Godina Golija, Maja. 2012. Contemporary Appropriations of Tradition in Slovenia. *Traditiones* 41(2): 91-104.

Hobsbawm, Eric. 2006. Introduction: Inventing Traditions. In *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, 1-14. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hrobat Virloget, Katja. 2012. Šagre v Istri: etnološki pogled. In *Istrski praznik: preteklost, sedanost, avtentičnost: šagre in ljudski prazniki v severni Istri*, ed. Aleksander Panjek, et al., 14-24. Koper: Univerza na Primorskem, Znanstveno-raziskovalni središče.

Keys, Ancel Benjamin, and Margaret Keys. 1959. *Eat Well and Stay Well*. New York: Doubleday.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Krese Baskar, Meta, and Bojan Baskar. 1993.
Mediterranska prehrana.

*Časopis za kritiko znanosti, domišljijo in
novo antropologijo* 158/159: 69-81.

Kocković, Tanja. 2014. Truffle-hunting in Istria. In *Edible
Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage*, ed. Ronda L. Brulotte and
Michael A. Di Giovine, 53-64. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.

Ledinek Lozej, Špela, and Nataša Rogelja. 2000. *Potepanja po
poteh Šavrinke Marije*. Ljubljana: Slovensko etnološko društvo.

Ledinek Lozej, Špela. 2015. *Od hiše do niše. Razvoj
kuhinje v Vipavski dolini*. Ljubljana: Založba ZRC.

Lenclud, Gérard. 1987. La tradition n'est plus ce qu'elle
était... Sur les notions de tradition et de société traditionnelle
en ethnologie. *Terrain, Habiter la Maison* 9: 110-123.

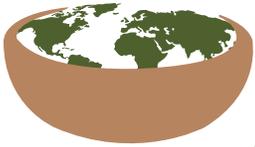
Ličen, Daša. 2015. *Istrian Culinary Experts:
Discourses, Taste, and Market*. Master's thesis,
University of Ljubljana and University of Vienna.

Ličen, Daša. 2015. The Fine and the Tasteless. Istrian
Culinary Experts and Taste. *Traditiones* 44 (3): 113-130.

Montanari, Massimo. 2006. *Food is Culture*.
New York: Columbia University Press.

Ogrin, Darko. 2004. Oljka v Slovenskem Primorju:
v primežu podnebja in trenutnih družbeno-
ekonomskih razmer. *Geografski obzornik: Časopis za
geografsko vzgojo in izobraževanje* 51 (2): 4-10.

Paxson, Heather. 2005. Slow Food in a Fat Society:
Satisfying Ethical Appetites. *Gastronomica: The
Journal of Food and Culture* 5 (1): 14-18.



Digest

a journal of foodways & culture

Pratt, Jeff. 2007. Food Values: The Local and the Authentic. *Critique of Anthropology*, 27 (3): 285-300.

Randić, Mirjana. 2006. Traditional Aspects of the Nutrition of the Adriatic Islands. In *Mediterranean Food: Concepts and Trends, Proceedings of the 15th International Ethnological Food Research Conference, Dubrovnik, 27 September-3 October, 2004*, ed. Patricia Lysaght with Nives Rittig-Beljak, 27-41. Zagreb: Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Research in association with the Ethnographic Museum.

Rihtman Avguštin, Dunja. 2001. *Etnologija i etnomit*. Zagreb: ABS95.

Rogelja, Nataša. 2006. Healthy Mediterranean Food in Local Perspective: The Case of the Slovenian Coast. *Anthropological Notebooks* 12 (1): 95-111.

Sammells, Clare A. 2014. Haute Traditional Cuisines: How UNESCO's List of Intangible Heritage Links the Cosmopolitan to the Local. In *Edible Identities: Food as Cultural Heritage*, ed. Ronda L. Brulotte and Michael A. Di Giovine, 141-158. Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate.

Sewell, William. 2005. *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Van Dijk, Teun A. 1997. *Discourse as Structure and Process of Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*. Volume I. London: Sage Publications.

Wilk, Richard. 2006. *Slow Food/Fast Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System*. Lanham: Altamira Press.

Zwart, Hub. 2005. Food Consumption in the Genomics Era: A Foucauldian Perspective. *Tailoring Biotechnologies* 1 (2): 31-44.