

## PREFACE

IS THERE A RELEVANT AND POSSIBLY EVEN VITAL CONNECTION TO BE MADE between food and place? On average, any food eaten in the United States has traveled at least fifteen hundred miles on its long, often winding journey from farm to table. Could it conceivably be important to know where your food comes from in an era when even our most quotidian meal—a dish of two pieces of bread with a ground-meat patty in the middle, served with the condiments of mustard and ketchup, and perhaps also lettuce, tomato, and onion—has come from unknown surroundings and traveled far before it is served at an American table? When our supermarkets are filled with thousands of processed foods but only hundreds of raw whole foods? When the average American eats one out of five restaurant meals in his or her car? This book says yes.

However, the relevance of the connections between food and place outlined in *The Taste of Place* may not echo the prevailing sentiments of food activists or parallel the popular analyses of journalists and scholars. Much of our present debate on the state of the contemporary food system (not just locally but globally)—and as a result the fate of farming, cooking, and eating—is grounded in two powerful American cultural values: first, that talking and caring about food above and beyond its mere sustenance value

are improper (a legacy of our Puritan ancestors), and second, that every American deserves a chicken in his or her pot. Any effort to influence our food culture must therefore embrace these values or be labeled as elitist. These assumptions, based on moral values, can make other values—concerning food practices, food tastes, and food origins—appear trivial. But what if concerns about practices, tastes, and origins in fact can help create alternative cultural values about place, about community, about agriculture, and about hospitality? And what if these alternative values allow us to see our contemporary food system and shape our food future in new ways? The intersection between taste and place organizes such values and practices.

How does this happen? Well, take the potato, like the hamburger, a quotidian food for Americans. A closer look at the humble spud illuminates the making of the taste of place in the United States. The average American consumes more than seventy pounds of potatoes per year, of which the majority are eaten as French fries. Maine farmers, as it was reported in a 2005 *New York Times* article, want to move beyond the hegemony of the French fry. These farmers and their allies want to make people realize the array of flavors and textures available from potatoes. Since the eighteenth century Maine has been a fertile ground for growing potatoes, but there has been a steep decline in the number of potato farmers over the past eighty years, from six thousand in 1940 to just under six hundred today. Over time, the distinctiveness of potatoes being from Maine has been lost to the larger world, but a number of farmers are trying to change that: “To distinguish their potatoes, these farmers have embraced a raft of ideological labels: organic, local, sustainable, heirloom, slow, artisanal, gourmet and farm to table. Instead of growing an industrial potato suitable for long-term storage, the farmers say they grow a culinary potato,” the article states.<sup>1</sup>

The culinary potato? The industrial potato? In the more than two hundred years since the potato was first planted in Maine, what has happened to food in America? In the first decade of the twenty-first century, we apparently

categorize our potatoes not simply according to variety—Yukon Gold, Carola, Russet—but also according to process and intent: culinary or industrial. The article reveals that the culinary potato is used in Portland chef Rob Evans’s roast potato soup with bacon and sour cream for an annual potato dinner dedicated to celebrating the tastes of Maine potatoes. The industrial potato, on the other hand, is grown by contract. It is then shipped to the new McCain processing plant in Easton, Maine, and ultimately transformed into precut, precooked French fries for any number of chain restaurants throughout the United States. Fifty years ago the industrial potato appeared to be the spud of the future in Maine, but now potato farmers there want to celebrate the uniqueness rather than the sameness of potatoes from this place, a land of loamy soil and cool northern climate. These farmers and their allies, such as chefs in funky restaurants in Portland, Maine, are helping to build the taste of place, or what the French call *le goût du terroir*.

The classic nineteenth-century French dictionary, Pierre Larousse’s *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle*, defines *terroir* as “the earth considered from the point of view of agriculture,” and clarifies with *le goût de terroir*: “the flavor or odor of certain locales that are given to its products, particularly with wine.” The ability to trace a connection between the symbolic and practical definitions of the earth and the tastes of food and beverage defines French food culture: as the dictionary elaborates on the definition, “*Ce vin a un goût du terroir; Je n’y trouve pas le parfum de terroir.*”<sup>2</sup>

Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss famously said, “Food is good to think.” The French have long thought about the relationship of food and beverage to place and linked place to taste, developing values and practices and making such thinking a type of cultural common sense. Here in the United States such thinking is also in play, and the taste of place could emerge as part of our cultural ways of knowing about food and beverage. My aim is to examine carefully the taste of place in France and the United States as a set of values, practices, and aspirations.<sup>3</sup> My hope is to reveal how such

thinking *and* doing may be a “middle way” for navigating between the increasingly relevant but beleaguered categories of local and global when we consider farming, cooking, and eating in the twenty-first century.

*The Taste of Place* uses stories—ethnographic descriptions and explanations of how this idea works in the everyday practices of people in France and the United States—to explore the contemporary genesis of *goût du terroir*. This book looks at numerous modern stories of farming, cooking, and eating, stories in which people embrace the culinary over the industrial, incorporate ideas about the importance of process and intent into growing plants, raise animals, make wine and cheese, and create meals. Such stories need to be considered together, as if they were individual squares of a quilt stitched together from coast to coast and from continent to continent, for only from their combined weight and impact does the entire pattern emerge.

Each chapter follows a main story, a certain road to the taste of place, but along the way I follow some side roads too, perhaps in the form of a historical discussion, a description of a place or a meal, or a short discourse on the many possible definitions of *terroir*. Chapter 1 situates the story in the past, focusing on the development of the *appellations d’origine contrôlée* and the founding of the Institut National des Appellations d’Origine in 1935. This chapter also explores the French cultural focus on the link between place, taste, and agriculture. Chapter 2 closely examines *l’affaire Mondavi*, the attempt by the Robert Mondavi Winery to create a *terroir*-style grand cru wine in the Languedoc region. Exploring the story of why the Mondavi family wanted to go there, what happened, and why they ultimately abandoned their efforts creates a more nuanced understanding of the cultural importance awarded to place by the French and introduces the many implications of globalization for any contemporary understanding of *terroir*. The scene shifts to California in chapter 3, which explores how *terroir* and *goût du terroir* are understood and used in the United States. The chapter focuses on Randall Grahm, an innovative winemaker from Santa Cruz who has dedicated his life to capturing *terroir* on

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American soil. California is also a point of origin for the countercuisine movement in the United States, a movement that has fully embraced the taste of place as an organizing principle, as fully revealed in the organization of the Ferry Building Marketplace in San Francisco. Chapter 4 looks closely at the importance of chefs and restaurants in the modern American version of the taste of place by telling the story of Odessa Piper, who owned and operated L'Etoile restaurant in Madison, Wisconsin, for almost thirty years. The restaurant continues to adhere to a philosophy of a Midwestern *cuisine du terroir*. The importance of agrarian values, both old and new, to the taste of place in Vermont, and an in-depth consideration of the Vermont Fresh Network, a small nonprofit partnership between farmers and chefs, form the center of chapter 5. This chapter also examines the importance of the back-to-the-land movement of the 1960s for the creation of an American version of the taste of place. The possible future of the taste of place, and the intersection of such a framing mechanism with the modern fascination with brands and branding, shapes chapter 6. This chapter moves between the United States, France, and Italy, focusing on the place-based foods maple syrup and goat cheese as the main lenses for the intersecting yet paradoxical notions of *goût du terroir* and, as the French say, “le marc.”

In a restaurant review in the same *New York Times* food section as that delineating the difference between the industrial and culinary Maine potato, reviewer Frank Bruni remarks on the ways food is good to think today: “To appreciate how far eating has evolved from a matter of survival to a statement of values, take a trip to Cookshop and look at its chalkboards.”<sup>4</sup> Bruni somewhat ambivalently excavates the connections between taste and place instrumental to the restaurant’s vision: “Cookshop, you see, is selling more than Montauk squid, Catskill duck, and a cornucopia of lettuces, legumes, root vegetables, and fruits that dutifully obey their seasons. Cookshop is selling virtue.”<sup>5</sup> As the review progresses, the tone becomes more favorable, for the restaurant’s “theology [also] incorporates the pleasure

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principle.”<sup>6</sup> For a restaurant to have values about food practices, tastes, and origins is acceptable, it appears, as long as those values are not too, well, puritanical. As these two short pieces, written for the same newspaper at the same time, reveal, the increased investment in food as the intentional result of unique processes and places is being taken seriously. However, the taste of place has yet to become part of our cultural common sense, for it continues to simultaneously engender sentiments of engagement and uneasiness. But there has been progress. Ultimately, after judging various dishes quite favorably, Bruni concludes that Cookshop is “a place where eating well and doing good find common ground.”<sup>7</sup> If these articles can serve as our Rosetta stone, helping us to unlock mysteries of meaning and action, we can see that the taste of place might be very good to think as we look into our globalized future, and might unite Americans, French, and others in how we farm, cook, and eat. And to begin, I will follow Salman Rushdie’s exhortation in his novel *Shame* that “in order to unlock a society, look at its untranslatable words.” Rushdie talks of Takallouf, “a member of that opaque, world-wide set of concepts which refuse to travel across linguistic frontiers.” We, though, will take a journey into *terroir*.