

From:  
Discourse + Identity 2006  
5 · Anna De Fina, Deborah Schiffrin,  
Michael Bamberg (eds)  
Cambridge Univ Press

## Identity à la carte: you are what you eat

Robin Tolmach Lakoff

### 5.1 Food in history and culture

Once upon a time, not all that long ago, human identity was generally viewed rather simply. It was assumed that identity achieved its final form in the course of childhood and adolescence, culminating in the famous Eriksonian “identity crisis,” the successful resolution of which ushered in a competent adulthood.<sup>1</sup> While experts disputed just when and how the larger aspects of individual identity congealed – gender identity for instance – and argued as well about the relationship between individual and group identity, identity was not seen as something adults actively worked on or typically experienced conflict over.

In recent years, prodded by feminist and queer theorists,<sup>2</sup> students of identity have radically changed their views. Increasingly they see human identity as a continual work in progress, constructed and altered by the totality of life experience. While much of the work in support of this belief concentrates on the larger aspects of identity – especially gender, ethnicity, and sexual preference – in fact human identity involves many other categories. Identity is constructed in complex ways, more or less consciously and overtly. Some aspects of identity, in particular those listed above, are applicable both to individual identity and a person’s identification as a member of a cohesive and coherent group.

<sup>1</sup> As discussed in Erikson (1950), especially chapter six.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. for instance Bucholtz, Liang, and Sutton (1999); Butler (1990); Anzaldúa (1987); and Barrett (1999).

Other aspects of individual identity are more subtle, perhaps less prone to being problematized, and not linked to group membership in any obvious way. While these have been given less attention than the others – perhaps with reason, since they are less apt to create either pride or distress – nonetheless they form a significant part of who we are and how we think of ourselves, and our selves. We might think of the first, more obvious, aspects of identity formation – e.g. race, gender, and sexual preference – as composing a person’s *major identity*, and these latter as aspects of a *minor identity*. Examples of such cases might be musical preferences, style of dress, and – the area I will discuss here – taste in the consumption and preparation of food.

The psychoanalysts, who were the first social scientists to consider identity closely, famously declared that sexuality was the most significant aspect of human identity and human intrapsychic and interpersonal behaviors. But here, too, a century after Freud’s original statements, we are learning that human beings are not as reductive as early theorists had claimed. We have other salient needs that are only sometimes capable of direct and uncomplicated expression, and which, like sexuality, must sometimes be sublimated or otherwise distorted if we wish to conform to group norms. One such category is that of food and how we feel about it. What we can and cannot eat, what kinds of edibles carry prestige, how much we are expected to know about what we eat – all of these are aspects of individual and group identity that may remain stable in a society for long periods of time, or may go through abrupt shifts. In this arena, as in others, socially competent individuals learn to bring their self-presentation into conformity with the ethos of the group in which they live. Those who wish to maintain their standing as competent persons learn to change their behavior with the times, in eating as in sexual or conversational style. Thus the attitudes and behaviors of individuals both mirror those of the larger society, and create them in microcosm.

The ways in which identity is formed have also lent themselves to more sophisticated analytic practice in recent years. Within the last quarter century or so, the roles that language plays in human interaction and individual self-awareness have become more apparent to social scientists, and have become more amenable to scholarly scrutiny as techniques for studying abstract linguistic

behavior have been developed – methods as diverse as discourse and conversation analysis, speech act theory and conversational logic. Earlier studies of identity tended to focus on the evidence available from psychopathology or analytic case histories. But increasingly research focuses on the forms of linguistic expression, oral and literate, formal and informal, spontaneous and planned, as evidence of the capacity shared by human beings for differentiating themselves from others and connecting themselves with others – the businesses of making, recognizing, and maintaining identity. Discourse of all types is a potent creator and enforcer of identity, and it is the sum of our daily linguistic interactions that, to a very large degree, creates us and recreates us continually.

My focus here is on the formation of individual identity: how each of us decides who he or she is, what her or his values and preferences are, on the basis of interactions with one another. But even when we concentrate on our individual selves, we are, knowingly or not, working toward the creation and re-creation of our group ethos. And the values, attitudes, and behaviors identified by the groups in which we acknowledge or desire membership will in turn influence our individual choices and our evaluations of those choices. Thus, in the areas I am discussing, as in others, the constructions of individual and group identities are closely linked and bidirectional.

This paper examines some of the ways in which individuals in one American subculture (at least some of the white, middle-class residents of Berkeley, California) form their food-related identity, and how food attitudes are part of the creation of a sense of social cohesion within that subculture. I will use mostly written documents: restaurant menus, cookbook recipes, newspapers and magazine commentary.

## 5.2 Changes in gastrolinguistics

America once was a country in which, it could reasonably be said, food was not a significant locus of personal (or group) identity. As late as the 1960s, undue concern with food, discrimination in one's eating habits, and interest in its preparation were apt to mark an American, and especially an American male, as either un-masculine or un-American, probably both. While women's

magazines contained recipes, and cookbooks were big sellers, both tended toward preparations that were fast, simple, and gastronomically unadventurous. Ingredients were simple, and the corner grocery or the neighborhood supermarket was unlikely to offer exotic products or boutique vegetables. Restaurants tended to provide the same kinds of foods we were accustomed to eating at home, except for ethnic restaurants where one could get chop suey, spaghetti and meatballs, and not too much more.

But by the early 1960s things were already beginning to change. Craig Claiborne's *New York Times Cookbook*, containing a wide variety of challenging and adventurous recipes, was first published in 1961. The nascent Public Broadcasting System's Boston affiliate, WGBH, started to air Julia Child as *The French Chef* a few years later; in 1966, with her collaborators Simone Beck and Louise Bertholle, Child published the first volume of *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. By the mid 1960s, it was possible to find dim sum and Szechuan restaurants in the Boston area; by the early 1970s one could count ten varieties of lettuce in at least one supermarket in Berkeley, California. These communities were atypical, of course, but could be seen as bellwethers of an American culinary reidentification. By the early 1980s, nouvelle cuisine was more or less available even as far from the bellwethers as Bloomington, Indiana.

In 1971 Alice Waters opened a small Provençal restaurant, Chez Panisse, on an otherwise unremarkable stretch of Shattuck Avenue in Berkeley. The rest, as they say, is history. By the early 1990s, the unmarked American attitude to food had undergone what is currently called a sea change (or a quantum leap). At my Berkeley supermarket this week I could get:

- white truffles
- poussins
- ostrich
- white asparagus
- broccoli rabe
- fresh tarragon
- soy milk
- Spanish cheeses
- French lemonade

super-premium dulce de leche ice cream  
 Valrhona bittersweet chocolate  
 pad-Thai mix  
 pappadums  
 Australian wines  
 at least ten different kinds of artisanal baguette  
 at least six kinds of balsamic vinegar

a list off the top of my head, not at all exhaustive; but none would have been available in the supermarket whose place the current one took, as late as the mid-1970s. So it is reasonable to conclude that something significant in the culture's regard for food has shifted.

To the degree that academic recognition of a field confers official status on it as *interesting*, the recent publication of several scholarly collections on food and its place in Western culture signifies this shift (Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Griffiths and Wallace 1998; Inness 2001), as does the creation of a new journal, *Gastronomica*, published by the University of California Press. At a more popular level, one can point to the creation of the Food Channel on cable television, as well as the near-saturation of cooking shows on Saturdays on PBS.

Nor would it be the first occasion of such a shift. Just as language change is a mark of cultural flux, so is gastronomic change. Tobias (1998) documents the role of cookbooks in colonial America. He notes that between the end of the colonial period and the mid-nineteenth century, the role of food and cooking underwent a marked shift, from something to which very little attention was paid (as measured by the sparsity of cookbooks during the period), to a matter of significance as manifested by the publication of many cookbooks and the development of detailed recipes and, by the end of the nineteenth century, precise measurements, oven temperatures, and cooking times. This shift not only signaled a change in the role of food in the culture, but also marked an increase in the prestige of private life relative to public, with hearth and home (and with them, mealtime) playing an increasingly important role in both men's and women's lives; and in the job of the middle-class woman, who increasingly was having to depend on fewer servants, but acquiring modern conveniences that removed some of the drudgery from kitchen tasks, allowing aesthetic considerations to play more

of a role in the cooking process. Being a "good cook," possessing arcane knowledge (secret recipes, special techniques), began to be a mark of the superior housekeeper and a point of pride – an important aspect of a woman's identity.

Restaurants, too, have undergone successive metamorphoses. Hardly extant in America at all until the mid-nineteenth century, they have reperceived their roles more than once in the intervening century and a half. What constitutes an appropriate and appealing "menu" and how the waiter and the customer should interact – crucial aspects of the dining experience – have changed greatly more than once over this time. A series of articles appearing in the *New York Times* in 1998 and 1999 (Grimes 1998, 1999; Hesser 1998) discusses some of these trends; the very fact that the paper of record has seen fit to devote very long articles (two of the three, with related articles and sidebars, occupy two pages each in the "Living Arts" section and the last is almost a page in length) itself signifies the importance of food as a cultural artifact at the dawn of the third millennium. Grimes (1998) discusses changes in menu style and content, as well as in the way in which a reader (or patron) is supposed to respond to the menu under inspection.

Ordering from a menu used to be routine. No more. It is becoming a journey into the unknown, a junior division of the adventure-travel industry, as chefs working with new cuisines and new ideas reconfigure their menus, creating new categories, offering new combinations of dishes and befuddling the unwary.

Originally (the article reproduces a menu from one of New York's first restaurants, Delmonico's, from 1834, to prove its point) menus were spare: offerings were familiar; the reader did not need to know more than simply what was available and how much it cost:

Cup tea or coffee	1	(cent)
Soup	2	
Beef Steak	4	

on up to

Roast Chicken, at an imperial 10 cents.

It is true that some of the things assumed to be too familiar to require commentary in 1834 seem distinctly strange to us today, and are unlikely to appear in any form on even the toniest or most

venturesome modern menu: Fried or Stewed Heart (3 cents) and Pigs Head (4 cents); but most of what appears are old standbys.

By 1887 Delmonico's menus had been upgraded and Frenchified, as illustrated in the same article. Foods are now assigned to designated courses: Potages, Hors d'oeuvre, Poisson, Relevé, Entrée, Rôti, Froid, and Entremets Sucrés.<sup>3</sup> There is, nonetheless, only one choice in most categories. Prices are not indicated. But while the level of consumer has apparently risen greatly (you are expected to know some French, and the appropriate order of a meal), not much needs to be said about the items on the list: they are familiar to the new type of patron (or at least, he or she had better pretend to familiarity): Palmettes à la varsoviennne; filet de boeuf à la Bernardi; Bécasses au Cresson. Neither the 1834 nor the 1887 versions looks very familiar to us, however. While the idea of the "restaurant" and the "menu" has, in some sense, remained constant over two centuries, our roles in and expectations of both are clearly very different from those of our ancestors.

Amanda Hesser's article, appearing the week after Grimes', offers further commentary on the new art of the menu. It concentrates less on its formal structure and more on style. The article comments specifically on the decline of the simple "salad" in restaurants, replaced by "witty new renditions," salads "made with humor and irony." So the food itself, or at least its verbal representation on the menu, has become a literary form. It has certainly not been commonplace to be able to think of food – salads, perhaps, least of all – as demonstrating wit, humor, or irony. But if we accept this idea, then the food itself becomes discourse. How can a salad be "witty" or "ironic," you ask? Well, what if it consists of a chunk of iceberg lettuce – but instead of the thousand island dressing of yore, it is lapped in "buttermilk-blue cheese dressing" and accompanied by "bacon and scallions." It's not quite retro, but a commentary on retro. You have to be gastronomically sophisticated, aware of the last fifty years of the American salad, to get the

<sup>3</sup> While a century ago (and probably until the 1960s) French was the only foreign language an American restaurantgoer needed to display sophistication, today's foodie requires a knowledge of the kitchen vocabularies of at least five or six languages: French, Italian, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and perhaps Hindi or Thai.

joke. So we no longer go to restaurants just to eat – we go to *interact* with, to engage in *discourse* with, our food. We are expected to play with our food, or at least respond to it playfully.

Grimes' second article, appearing almost exactly a year after the first, takes on another aspect of the restaurant experience. Even in the highest temples of gastronomy, the formality and hushed reverence expected of old has largely given way to informality. A frequent diner at such establishments ventures, "In the past, you felt that dining in a top restaurant was a rare privilege, and you'd better behave. Now, there's a warmth and an interaction that wasn't there before." Grimes continues, "In a city where intimidation is nine points of the law and one-upmanship is the coin of the realm, pleasing the customer counts as a revolutionary idea." The balance of power, in other words, has shifted from the establishment (personified by the waiters) to the patron: the former must accommodate the latter, not the other way around.

One index of the importance of an artifact in any culture is the proliferation of new words around it. That has certainly been the case with food in America over the last quarter century. There are, as suggested in the list given above, innumerable new words for new foods, or new forms or appreciations of old ones, words that were certainly not in the common American English vocabulary at the start of this period, but which are now in general use among everyone with pretensions to gastronomic culture:

pain de mie  
Muscovy duck  
chanterelle  
heirloom tomato  
cold-press extra virgin olive oil  
mesclun

There are words for methods of getting, keeping, or making food:

forager  
Wolf range  
Sub-zero refrigerator  
sweating (e.g. onions)  
mounting (or monter) [a sauce]  
garde-manger

fond  
caramelization

Most of these terms existed previously in the vocabularies of professional food workers, but it is only recently that they have made their way into the active vocabularies of consumers (as demonstrated, for instance, by their use without definitions on television cooking shows).

And words have been developed for those who produce or consume the final product:

foodie  
Chez Panisse Mafia  
food Nazi  
Gourmet Gulch (or Ghetto)

So all the signs suggest that food occupies a pivotal spot in the consciousness of Americans; and that being willing and able to talk at length and correctly about it, as well as knowing how to order, eat, and often cook it, are both relatively new modes of personal interaction and shibboleths of group membership in that culture.

As with other forms of discourse and more generally social interaction, forms of behavior are normally ambiguous: they can, in different contexts, signify any of several different things. So knowledge of a type of food, or a technique, can mark not only ethnic or professional identity, but increasingly, also be used as a marker of education and sophistication, or as a means of creating secret-handshake identification with an interlocutor (like slang or professional code). In a more and more overarching way, we are what we eat – our identity is predicated on what we know about food. A menu can be merely a list of what is available at a given establishment, or can be the opening gambit in a game between restaurateur and patron: who are you, here's who I am, here's what I want from you, here's how we'll behave toward each other.

### 5.3 Reading the menu

A restaurant menu communicates a number of things to its reader. Some of these are present or inferable on all menus; the presence of others depends on the nature of the menu and the restaurant.

It is always necessary to indicate that what is being perused *is* in fact a restaurant menu: food is available for a set, non-negotiable price. While the creators of the menu, the restaurateurs, can safely assume that the nature of the establishment is obvious to visitors, and that what one goes to a restaurant for and how one behaves there is likewise presupposed, nonetheless a piece of paper entitled “menu” or something similar makes the point inescapable. Further, the handing-over of the menu to the patron is one of the most significant explicit steps in the restaurant game, along with: making a reservation; greeting by the maitre d'; ordering; eating; paying. But since the first two of these are not part of every restaurant experience, and are in a sense preparatory to the chef d'oeuvre, the true business at hand, it is the handing-over of the menu that truly initiates the experience of “eating out at a restaurant.” It is, moreover, the first clear opportunity for the restaurant to identify itself to the patron and give an indication about what kind of establishment it is, and, therefore, what kind of patrons they anticipate serving, in terms of their prior knowledge and interactive behavior. In accepting the menu, the patron implicitly agrees to the terms of the restaurant, and is assumed to know what is expected and be willing to comply.

The menus I have collected range between two poles. On one side there are relatively few choices, but much information is given about those choices. On the other there can be many choices, but much less information. Consider as Exhibit A a menu from Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California. Chez Panisse is a kind of temple of gastronomy: it is a shrine to which pilgrims come to worship – pilgrims who are both affluent (the prix fixe weekend menu is \$75.00, plus wine, tax, and 18% service charge) and knowledgeable.

#### Example 5.1

FRIDAY, APRIL 13 [2001] \$75  
An aperitif  
Asparagus with scrambled eggs and *migas*  
Spicy Catalan fish soup  
Grilled Paine Farm squab with green olives, leeks, and wild mushrooms  
Blood orange-walnut crêpes à la Panisse

If you don't understand the CP mystique, the above menu is both curiously vague and oddly specific. A CP menu offers no choice:

you eat what is put in front of you, and your acceptance of the menu signifies your acceptance of those terms. But how can the prospective patron give informed consent to the first item, listed as it is only as “an aperitif”? One must be in awe of the environs and therefore fully trusting, and openminded (and open-palated) enough to accept whatever turns up.

The next item seems straightforward enough except for the “*migas*.” My Spanish dictionary (and presumably the patron is expected to know (a) Spanish and (b) that the word is Spanish, when (c) Spanish is not one of the languages ordinarily expected of the gourmet)<sup>4</sup> defines *miga* as “crumb.” Then why not simply call a crumb a crumb? Perhaps *miga* provides a segue into the next item. Or maybe a “*miga*” isn’t *exactly* a crumb, or exclusively one. So a menu entry that at first glance seems to be reasonably informative on second glance is revealed to be almost as mysterious as the first.

The next course is pretty straightforward (except that it doesn’t mention which spices, or what fishes, compose the “spicy Catalan fish soup”).

The fourth item is pure Chez Panisse. The meat is exotic, “special” in a way that nothing preceding has been: squab, not mere chicken. (Indeed, except for the wild mushrooms and the blood oranges in the dessert, this is the only unusual or exotic item on the menu.) But more, it is “Paine Farm squab.” The Chez Panisse downstairs restaurant weekly menu (from which the example above is excerpted) contains a legend in italics at the bottom: “*Most of our produce and meat comes from local farms and ranches that practice ecologically sound agriculture.*” So whatever it tastes like, eating the squab is an act of civic virtue; the patron, in accepting the menu, shows him- or herself to be not only a person of taste and refinement, but of consummate ecological sensitivity. “Paine Farm” further signifies that the meat we will be eating is not mere generic squab, but rather squab specially raised to be particularly toothsome. (We don’t know just how, but it must be so: by the rules of Conversational Logic (Grice 1975), the menu wouldn’t

<sup>4</sup> While the last footnote suggested that a sophisticated restaurant patron should know some Spanish, that knowledge is typically confined to a few terms, e.g. *tacos*, *mole poblano*, *refritos* – the language of Mexican or Latin American restaurants. *Migas* would not normally be recognized.

be this explicit unless the explicitness foreshadowed the gustatory experience.) The reader is assumed to be aware of that specialness as a true appreciator.

Indeed, almost all of the menus listed on the sheet from which this example is taken offer similar specificity at least once. Monday, April 9: *Larsen Ranch* pork shoulder; Tuesday, April 10: Spit-roasted *Dal Porto Ranch* leg of lamb; Wednesday, April 11: *Liberty Ranch* duck. On Thursday, the convention takes a break, but on Saturday, April 14, we find a double dose: Grilled *Dal Porto Ranch* spring lamb with *Chino Ranch* fava beans, artichokes and peas.

The menu is highly specific in other ways as well. It tends to mention all the identifiable ingredients found in a dish: “with bacon, braised endives, green lentils, and turnips.” Another kind of menu might merely refer to “mixed vegetables.” Moreover, the specificity is often meaningful only to the *cognoscenti*, as in “green lentils” – vs. the normal browns.

The menu presumes a worldliness on its readers’ part: there is much use of foreign languages, and not only words from common cuisinary languages or terms of cuisine. Monday is Italianate, with *Torta Pasqualina*; *Costoletta di maiale alla toscana*; and Meyer lemon *pasticcini* for dessert. Tuesday’s dessert is French: *noyau* and amarena cherry soufflé; Thursday’s is an apple and hazelnut *tourte*; on Friday there are the *migas*; and Saturday’s dessert is a cardamom *baba au rhum*. So the patron must be linguistically sophisticated and tillated rather than put off by opaque terminology.

Now consider a menu from a restaurant across the street from Chez Panisse, but a universe away: a humble Chinese takeout. At Chez Panisse, you have one choice and only one per evening. At the Oriental Restaurant, there are ninety-seven numbered dishes from which to make your selection: you may choose as many as you wish. At CP, if you don’t know what aioli or tangelo is, unless you are very courageous, you’ll just have to be surprised. But the Oriental Restaurant states its philosophy on its cover: “There are pictures displayed in our store to make your selection easier.” They are in full color and detailed. A very different relationship is being created between restaurateur and customer, and a very different sort of customer (or, perhaps the same customer but in a different frame of mind) is presupposed. For one thing, customers are not assumed to be trusting: they need to know exactly what they will be getting.

They are more in control: they make the choices, from a very broad range. There are broad categories: Appetizers, Soups, Noodle Plates, Fried Rice Plates, Claypot, Main Entrees (subdivided into Vegetarian [sic] Plates and Traditional Plates), and Oriental Plates. Within each category are at least five or six choices, in one case over thirty. Among the many Traditional Plates we can find:

Example 5.2

1. Vegetable w/ shrimps, chicken, beef, pork *or* squids
2. Celery and pineapple w/ shrimps, chicken, beef, pork, *or* squids
3. Mushrooms w/ shrimps, chicken, beef, pork, *or* squids

and similarly for tofu, bell peppers, snow peas and black mushrooms, green peas and black mushrooms, green peas and tofu, tofu and black mushrooms . . . well, you get the idea. (All of these are \$9.96 regular, \$16.20 special.) So doing the math, each of 26 of the "traditional plates" should be multiplied by five, resulting in a truly gargantuan range of options.

Although customers are given *carte blanche* as far as choice is concerned, in other ways they are treated less munificently. The vegetables and meats are simply generic, with no *appellation* provided. No method of cooking is specified. So there is no indication that the patron is one to whom deference or respect is due: no presumptive arcane knowledge, no developed appreciation.

Indeed, the very design of the menus signifies the difference in role. The CP menu is elegantly calligraphed with striking print and lots of luxurious white space around it. The Oriental Restaurant menu is much more compact: smaller and darker type, packed close together. (The typo "Vegetarian" itself signifies diminished expectations, for the restaurateur himself and for his patrons: "Who cares?") But that's what you can expect for \$9.96, as opposed to \$75.00.

So the menu interaction creates a relationship between patron and restaurateur. Each comes to the table (as it were) with pre-existing expectations of character, interaction, and role to be played; the menu merely validates and underscores those assumptions and sets the stage for the main act, the food and the eating of it, again according to personal expectations. The Chez Panisse and Oriental Restaurant menus are no more interchangeable than the restaurants

they represent. It is probable that, if one were presented with a Chez Panisse-type menu at the Oriental Restaurant, it would be almost as disconcerting as the reverse would be. Both would create identity confusion.

Many of us, of course, patronize both kinds of places, and many in between. In that sense our gastronomic identities remain plastic and malleable. But that does not mean that we are comfortable with whatever transpires at a restaurant. If the menu we are handed doesn't meet our prior expectations, the entire meal may suffer: we have not been treated as the people we believe we are.

In intermediate cases, a patron must be flexible, indeed, to be several kinds of people at once. There exist cluttered menus with exotic names and more or less elaborate descriptions. There are Asian restaurants that have adapted to the terrain and provide elaborate and descriptive menus, using some of the same kinds of ingredients one might expect to find at Chez Panisse (but with the many choices characteristic of the Chinese menu). Thus with Kirin, an upscale Chinese restaurant in Berkeley. As with the Oriental Restaurant, offerings on the menu are organized into categories: Appetizers, Cold Appetizers, Soup; Mu Shu, Beef and Lamb, Pork; Vegetables and Tofu, Fowl; Seafood; Rice, Chow Mein and Chow Fun. But for the items in these categories, rather than presenting a stark description according to main contents, Kirin's menu offers descriptions that include a summary of ingredients, methods, and flavors. Interestingly, unlike the simpler place (which is likely to cater to many Chinese students), Kirin's menu gives Chinese characters alongside the English names of the dishes.

Example 5.3

Hot and Sour Soup [characters]  
*A Northern Chinese mixture of shredded chicken, shrimp, tofu, peas, willow tree fungus in a peppery and tangy chicken broth finished with whipped eggs.*

Unlike Chez Panisse, and like the Oriental Restaurant, Kirin offers many choices (so, e.g., soups can be ordered in three sizes). Courses are à la carte. But the menu's descriptions are reminiscent of those of gourmet western-cuisine restaurants. One way to read such a menu is to see it as intended for a bilingual and bicultural consumer – one conversant in the communicative presuppositions

of both ordinary Asian restaurants and Chez Panisse. Kirin's price range, too, is intermediate. While the Oriental Restaurant's prices are very low (small hot and sour soup is \$2.30, large \$3.60), Kirin's are higher (but nowhere near the celestial cost of Chez Panisse: the small hot and sour soup is \$5.95, medium \$7.25, and large \$12.00). Berkeley restaurant patrons can assume several different identities, depending on what they want to eat and how they want to eat it.

But relationships and expectations shift like fashions in dress. In another recent article on mediated restaurant-patron relationships William Grimes (2002) writes about a shift taking place at some upscale New York restaurants: instead of loading the menu with informative content, the latter has been assigned to the mouth of the waiter.

This sort of encounter [over-informativeness on the part of a waiter] is becoming more common, and I should have seen it coming. A few years ago, restaurant menus reached the limit in text-heaviness. Every dish was explicated and annotated, with commentary sometimes running to a full paragraph. Gradually, the pendulum swung the other way, and chefs began identifying their wares by a simple word or two. In extreme cases, the menu might simply name the principal ingredient and the cooking method. Further details would be offered tersely, in very small type underneath. "Roast cod" on a menu of this sort carried the implied message, "Need we say more?"

While this shift has not yet reached Berkeley, one can understand it. Extreme informativeness on a menu was originally devised to convey a message that may be glossed:

We know that you are a connoisseur and a person who knows his/her way around a kitchen. You therefore need to know precisely what is involved in the production of a dish, even as a literary critic needs to know the sources and references in a poem. Both activities are a kind of scholarly enterprise. By our specificity, we recognize you as a scholar of cuisine, one who cares as much as we do, knows as much as we do – viz. *one of us*.

The message was intended as one of inclusion, a kind of inclusive *we*.

But this sort of explicit inclusiveness is problematic in the negotiation of relationships. As Grice (1975) has noted, if you choose to make a statement, your hearer necessarily assumes that there was a *need* to make it – things could be otherwise. And by saying, in effect, "You and I – we're the same," the restaurant's menu might be read (by the insecure gastronome) as more deeply implicating, "Maybe

so, but it's not all that obvious. We have to spell it all out for you, as we would not for ourselves." So the pendulum swings to facilitate the patron's sense of belonging: by saying as little as possible, the restaurant conveys intimacy. Respect is never having to say, "Niman-Schell Ranch." At the same time, though, the restaurant needs to have a means of slipping the full information to the patron, a task that has now been entrusted to the waiter.

#### 5.4 The recipe for happiness

The reciprocal of the menu, in a sense, is the recipe. The reader becomes the means of production rather than consumption, but the end product is similar. As with menu construction, recipe-writing is an art-form that has changed over time, and as with menus, the changes are related to the writer's assumptions about the relationship shared with the reader.

Before the beginning of the twentieth century recipes tended to be enigmatic, at least by modern standards. Quantities, times, and methodological details were normally lacking, wholly or in part. Fisher (1968:16) quotes in full a seventeenth-century recipe for Herring Pye:

Put great store of sliced onions, with Currants and Raisins of the sun both above and under the Herrings, and store of butter, and so bake.

To us this seems incomprehensible, instructions that leave us hardly better off than before we read them. But old cookbook writers could afford to be enigmatic; or rather, for their presumptive audiences, they were not enigmatic, but adhering perfectly to the Gricean Maxims as demanded of instructional texts. Their intended readers were professional cooks, who had been taught to cook as children by their mothers, and who needed only the most general guidance, since they did their cooking intuitively.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, servants were disappearing from the middle-class American household. Those servants who remained tended to be young immigrant women, who, even if they had been taught to cook by their mothers, certainly could not provide the kind of food demanded by American families of that era. Young wives were not generally educated as specialized cooks, and the kitchen was a place of mystery to them. In order to be able



to cook, they had to be told precisely how to produce even the most familiar dishes. They required specifications of ingredients, times, and methods. The first cookbook to do this in a modern way is generally considered to be Fannie Merritt Farmer's (1896) *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book*. Farmer standardized traditional terms like "cup" and "teaspoon," and offered detailed recipes not unlike those familiar to cooks of a century later. We can understand the revolution, for such it was, as a response by writers of cookbooks to a changing readership: people whose primary identity was not as professional "cooks" and who therefore could not be presumed to be coming into the kitchen with a lot of prior knowledge. Rather than a partnership of peers sharing a profession and the arcane knowledge that is a part of it – writer and reader of the twentieth-century cookbook had a nonegalitarian and nonintimate relationship. The writer typically was a professional; the reader, an amateur. For the writer, cooking was life; for the reader, it was either one of many useful skills, or an adjunct to her otherwise busy life. (And the reader, though not the writer, was normally assumed to be female: the home kitchen until very recently was a woman's preserve.) Quite often, cooking was seen as something the busy housewife had to do, without much desire or pleasure, as efficiently and swiftly as possible (Hence the popularity of Peg Bracken's early 1960s *I Hate to Cook Book*). Recipes tended to be cobbled together of precooked canned or frozen ingredients: canned tuna and Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup topped with crumbled potato chips; thawed frozen green beans with canned French-fried onions; the ubiquitous green Jell-O mold with canned fruit salad.

Beginning in the 1960s, the relationship between cookbooks and cooks, and cooks and their kitchens, underwent a dramatic change. Although, as I noted above, Julia Child is often credited with the birth of American gastronomy, others made significant contributions. Craig Claiborne's *New York Times Cookbook* was published in 1961. But the publication date is a bit deceptive, as the book represents a compilation of many years of recipes published in the newspaper, so the renaissance (or rather, naissance) really started in the 1950s – the era immortalized by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, in which college-educated women had to find ways to deal with confinement to the home, without going crazy. One way was to apply the perseverance, intelligence, and

analytic skills developed through higher education to the role of homemaker – a word that had just come into vogue. And the most attractive aspect of homemaking from that perspective was cooking, which has attributes of both art and science. Food preparation, which a half century ago had changed from professional to amateur status, was now shifting to pro-am. Betty Fussell's *My Kitchen Wars* (1999) eloquently and hilariously documents the competition among academic wives at Princeton in those times to cook the hardest, most exotic, most expensive dishes. But contestants in these games needed exact directions and specifications – especially since, often, they had never actually seen the dishes they were executing prepared, or even tasted them.

Even for those who were not playing Fussell's game, interest in food and its preparation grew exponentially during the 1960s and succeeding decades. People were beginning to travel, and even live, in foreign countries and became familiar with their cuisines and wished to reproduce them; foreign restaurants sprang up in many cities, and those who frequented them became curious about how the food was made, even venturing to attempt it themselves; they began to wander into Chinatown and other exotic parts of town, examining wood ears and tiger lily buds, la yu and hoisin sauce.

So the American relationship to food and its preparation had shifted greatly since the 1950s. We began to look to cookbooks not only to enable us to create new kinds of foods, but also to ratify the new, post-1960s *us*. "You are what you eat" was a popular, if confusing, slogan of the counterculture. Some of us took it literally.

The best recipe for someone wanting to use cuisine as the springboard to a classier identity was the diametric opposite of one aimed at a professional cook who wanted to produce only familiar dishes others like her had been cooking for centuries – the assumption behind the seventeenth-century cookbook. Now the reader was an amateur for whom cooking was a hobby, but a deadly serious one. It had become important to produce – for family or friends – food of "restaurant quality," using unusual ingredients and complex techniques; but the cook had to be led carefully through the process, often starting from the composition of the shopping list. The author was skating on thin, and ambiguous, ice: the reader had to be addressed as a sophisticated novice. Cutting corners, as recommended in American cookbooks of the 1950s, was *passé*.

Substitution of common American products for exotic ones – say, canned beef gravy for demiglace – was unthinkable. Yet the reader's time and patience were limited, and experience frequently minimal. Cookbooks of the 1960s through the 1980s found various ways to make the necessary adjustments.

To get an idea of the range of options, let us examine similar recipes from three cookbooks of very different persuasions. The differences will suggest the ways in which each writer constructs her reader, and the triangular relationship (reader, food, writer) that the latter is creating through the form of the recipe she chooses. I will look at the following three cookbooks, each representative of a type:

Irma S. Rombauer and Marion Rombauer Becker (1964) *The Joy of Cooking*.

Simone Beck, Louisette Bertholle, and Julia Child (1966) *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, volume 1.

Alice Waters (1996) *Chez Panisse Vegetables*.

The recipe under comparison is one for potato gratin: sliced potatoes, baked with a liquid and often onions, cheese, and/or butter (and other optional ingredients).

#### Example 5.4

*Joy of Cooking* 1964: 291–292.

#### SCALLOPED POTATOES

4 Servings

Preheat oven to 350°.

Grease a 10-inch baking dish. Place in it, in 3 layers:

3 cups pared, very thinly sliced potatoes

Dredge the layers with flour and dot them with butter. Use in all:

2 tablespoons flour

3 to 6 tablespoons butter

There are many tidbits you can put between the layers. Try:

(1/4 cup finely chopped chives or onions)

(12 anchovies or crisp bacon – but then reduce the salt in the recipe)

(1/4 cup finely sliced sweet peppers)

Heat:

1 1/4 cups milk or cream

Season with:

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon paprika

(1/4 teaspoon mustard)

Pour the milk over the potatoes. Bake them for about 1 1/2 hours. They may be covered for the first 1/2 hour.

#### Example 5.5

*Mastering the Art of French Cooking* 1966: 523–524.

#### GRATIN DAUPHINOIS

[Scalloped Potatoes with Milk, Cheese, and a Pinch of Garlic]

There are as many “authentic” versions of *gratin dauphinois* as there are of *bouillabaisse*. Of them all, we prefer this one because it is fast, simple, and savory. It goes with roast or broiled chicken, turkey, and veal. With roast beef, pork, lamb, steaks, and chops you may prefer the *gratin savoyard* which follows, since it is cooked with stock rather than milk. Although some authorities on *le vrai gratin dauphinois* would violently disagree, you may omit the cheese. If you do so, add 2 more tablespoons of butter.

#### For 6 people

---

*Preheat oven to 425 degrees.*

2 lbs. “boiling” potatoes (6 to 7 cups when sliced)

A fireproof baking-serving dish about 10 inches in diameter and 2 inches deep (if recipe is increased, dish must be wider but no deeper) 1/2 clove peeled garlic

4 Tb. butter/1 tsp. salt/1/8 tsp. pepper/1 cup (4 ounces) grated Swiss cheese/1 cup boiling milk

Peel the potatoes and slice them 1/8 inch thick. Place in a basin of cold water. Drain when ready to use. \_\_\_\_\_

Rub the baking dish with the cut garlic. Smear the inside of the dish with 1 tablespoon of the butter. Drain the potatoes and dry them in a towel. Spread half of them in the bottom of the dish. Divide over them half the salt, pepper, cheese, and butter. Arrange the remaining potatoes over the first layer, and season them. Spread on the rest of the cheese and divide the butter over it. Pour on the boiling milk. Set baking dish over heat and when simmering, set in upper third of preheated oven. Bake for 20 to 30 minutes or until potatoes are tender, milk has been absorbed, and the top is nicely

browned. (As the oven is hot, and the dish shallow, the potatoes cook quickly.)

May wait for half an hour, loosely covered, over simmering water.

For a longer wait, stop initial cooking just before all milk has evaporated. Set aside uncovered. Shortly before serving, dot with 2 Tb butter, reheat on top of stove, and set in a 425-degree oven for 5 to 10 minutes to finish cooking.

#### Example 5.6

*Chez Panisse Vegetables* (1966: 248).

#### POTATO GRATIN

Rub an earthenware gratin dish with smashed peeled garlic and butter. Layer overlapping slices of potato cut 1/8 inch thick. Season with salt, pepper, and thyme leaves. Make another layer of potato slices, and season again. Moisten with cream, cream and chicken stock, or milk to the top level of potatoes. According to taste, sprinkle the top with grated Parmesan or Gruyère cheese, and distribute thin shavings of butter on top. Bake 45 minutes to 1 hour in a preheated oven at 375°F, until nicely browned.

Many variations are possible: potato and turnip (page 302), potato and celery root (page 89), potato and winter squash (page 276), potato and leek, potato and black truffle, or potato and sweet potato. Try adding a layer of some other delicious thing between the potato layers: sorrel, green garlic or roasted garlic, grilled chicory, sautéed wild mushrooms, caramelized onion, kale or chard, black olives, artichoke hearts.

On the surface these recipes seem similar, and indeed their finished products are likely to be very similar to one another. But the ways in which the authors approach the subject of potato gratin are quite distinct, largely because the imagined reader and user of each recipe is seen as a different kind of person.

The Child recipe is the most complex of the set, although by the standards of the cookbook as a whole, it is unusually short. (The recipe for Cassoulet is, famously, about six times as long, counting introductory matter.) Still, it is more than twice as long as either of the others (373 words to *Joy's* 122 and *Panisse's* 152). It is very detailed and precise in terms of what to do, when to do it, and how much of it to do it with, or to. While *Joy* is content to allude to "3 layers," *Mastering* describes the structuring of the gratin layer by layer. It is also the only one of the recipes to concern itself with the pre-preparation of the potatoes. While *Joy* offers the reader options for "tidbits" to place between the layers, *Mastering* is more rigid, and only very tentatively in the introduction offers the risky option

(don't offend a French "authority"!) of omitting the cheese. Child and her collaborators would seem to be writing for someone without much kitchen experience (the most specialized term in the recipe, "simmer," is defined at the beginning of the book), but with the patience and obedience to follow detailed and precise instructions to the letter. Recall that the two books were published nearly contemporaneously, and reflect on their titles: *The Joy of cooking*: it's not as bad as it's made out to be – in fact, it might be that most American of virtues, "fun"; vs. *Mastering the Art of French cooking*: it is a daunting task, but possible; and what is learned is an "art," not a mere skill or daily drudgery. Both books, though, comment in their titles about the kind of activity their readers are going to be engaged in when they use them; the third, *Chez Panisse Vegetables*, has as its title a simple description of its contents, without any promises made to the reader about what (s)he is about to embark upon or how it will feel to do it.

All three recipes involve about the same amount of work and the same amount of difficulty. But the explicitness of *Mastering*, while on the one hand demystifying the process and leaving nothing to chance, at the same time makes the process more daunting, especially to the neophyte. For instance, while *Joy* trusts the reader to know how thin "very thinly sliced" potatoes are, *Mastering* defines them as exactly 1/8" thick. The style of *Joy* is rather brusque and straightforward by comparison: ingredients are incorporated syntactically into the instructions, where in *Mastering* the reader needs to flip from left to right, creating the impression of extra steps. The fact that both *Joy* and *Panisse* encourage the reader to make free choices among optional ingredients suggests that both of these have more trust in the reader's judgment and competence than does *Mastering*; and that, therefore, the former two consider the reader more of an equal and a colleague than does the third.

*Chez Panisse Vegetables* was published forty years after the other two, and reflects the changes in our relationship to the kitchen that the others, and similar works, brought into being. It is quite short, and much less concerned with clarity of exposition or demystification of ingredients or technique. As with the CP menus, less is more – more collegial, that is. Waters can assume that the user of her recipes is conversant with complex cooking techniques and ingredients – ingredients that Rombauer and Becker would

never have considered at all, and Child and her collaborators would have dismissed as either inaccessible to, or too weird for, the American kitchen: you can read the entirety of the other books without running into a single reference to black truffles, green garlic, or grilled chicory, but *Panisse* treats all of them, and more, as completely unremarkable and familiar – not requiring explanations or excuses. If *Mastering* were to call for any of the above, it would describe them in detail, either in the body of the recipe itself or, more likely, in an introductory paragraph (or several). *Panisse* assumes that all of these exotica are as familiar to the cook as to Waters herself. While both *Joy* and *Mastering* are specific about ingredients and methods, *Panisse* is considerably vaguer – leaving many decisions, in postmodern fashion, up to the reader.

As often in *Panisse*, quantities are not given, and technical description is allusive rather than detailed. On the other hand, the equipment is specified in somewhat more detail (no mere “baking dish,” but an “earthenware gratin” dish). Both identically specify the desired appearance of the final product, “nicely browned,” as *Joy* does not.

The aim of *Joy*, I think, is to convince the reader that there is no mystique – just do it; of *Mastering*, that there is plenty of mystique, but the reader can overcome it with the writers’ help; and of *Panisse*, that professionals like *us* are aware of the mystique, but we’re beyond being bothered by it. The three very different recipes for a very similar product reflect very different kinds of communication, based in turn on different assumptions made by each author (or set of authors) about who the reader is, what the writer’s relationship with the reader and the reader’s relationship with the kitchen is, and what the reader therefore wants and needs. And the reader in turn constructs his/her identity as a “cook” on the basis of that conversation: I am someone who needs precise guidance in the kitchen in order to get the job done (*Joy*); someone who looks for exacting detail in order to achieve *Mastery*; someone who is already professional in all but literal truth, who simply needs a little advice from a professional colleague (*Panisse*).

By comparison with the 1960s models, the *fin-de-siècle Panisse* may seem a striking novelty. But we have seen that those books were following the model provided by Fannie Farmer, who represented a striking change from the prevailing style of her times. That

vague and imprecise style of menu writing was, as we have seen, intended for a reader who herself was a professional in the kitchen and therefore needed no more than general hints about ingredients and procedures. From this long-term vantage point, we can perhaps understand the ways of *Panisse* as the opening wedge of a post-millennial future, one in which home cooks have been, in a sense, re-professionalized (as their ability to recognize and use arcane terminology demonstrates). The cook has returned to a role and status in many (though by no means all) ways more similar to that of the professional for whom pre-Fannie Farmer cookbooks were written than to the cooks for whom *Joy* and *Mastering* were written.

### 5.5 Summary and conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed activities through participation in which we daily engage in the making and changing of our sense of who we are – our identities. While the construction of major aspects of human identity – sexuality, race, ethnicity, gender – may have more striking consequences, “minor identities” like culinary preferences and sophistication contribute significantly to our sense of ourselves: who we are, how competent we are, who our friends are or should be, whom we admire or disdain. Cuisine has in many ways affected our language, both our vocabularies and the way we construct discourse around food, its procurement, and its preparation. Some of us are more avid “foodies” than others; but even those who are proud to proclaim their disinterest in such things are aware that – in many circles, at any rate – theirs is a minority attitude, one that marks its possessor as a bit of an oaf. It has not always been the case in America that an appreciation of *haute cuisine* was a marker of intellectual and aesthetic achievement, but that is the case in many social milieux today; and consequently, being able to participate knowledgeably and volubly in the discourse of food, and knowing how to make sense of the menus and recipes one encounters, marks one as a serious person in the early twenty-first century.