

A SOCIO-SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE ON AUSTRALIAN GOURMET PRODUCTS/SERVICES: 'MADE IN AUSTRALIA' MARKETING STRATEGIES

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Abstract: *In a consumerist society, the contemporary needs of individuals have been transformed into desires; people nowadays seek into improving quality of life through unique experiences, by speculating their senses, in a grammar of both hedonist and utilitarian reasons. As such, taste becomes a social signifier that reunites people at the same table, where positioning oneself in the created micro-society, represents commensality and a major key in marketing studies. Another important aspect in F&B - as a socially (pre)determined marker - is that individuals are involved in naming their experiences, i.e. in marketing terms, branding a story, which eventually translates an identity.*

In this paper, my aim is to demonstrate how F&B Australian successful entrepreneurs (re)created a national identity, by fashioning the imagery of taste and linguistics, shaped by the semiosis of local flavors and colors, eventually all packaged in a narrative of marketing. Moreover, this is a study case of an economic national strategy - patriotic marketing, applied in F&B, and, paradoxically enough, exploited within tourism practices. Eventually, this research is also prone to describe the social-semiotic aspect of the 'signe gustatif' that frames the meaning of the dish and its social effects in the table's process of communication.

Key-words: *commensality; communication; identity; marketing; social-semiotics.*

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Motto: 'L'Autre est alors ce qui garantit la parole. Il est même le lieu «où se constitue le Je qui parle». Et l'Autre (le grand Autre, dit Lacan) est une réserve infinie de signifiants que le sujet rencontre dès qu'il entre dans le monde.' Ollivier Bruno

I. INTRODUCTION

The central aim of this research is to establish an interdisciplinary approach of social and economic fields, framed within the relevance of sign in creating cultural identity via cuisine practices. When semiotics crosses communication and they meet marketing's interest through the exploration of the *sensible*, it is the point where the individual is prone to have a moment of experience, a moment of giving *sense* to his/her life. Notable contribution of these fields of study along with a focus on the aesthetics of human capital in contemporary entrepreneurship, will put the issue of this case study (eating - a matter of sense and sensitiveness), in a different light, thus positioning the human being as an individual at a certain scale in the society. But when situated on a more intimate inner scene, higher needs will transform this individual, an integrated part of a culture - in respect with Maslow's theory (Iliescu and Petre, 2005) - into a select consumer.

It is said that nowadays' consumers are more and more fastidious, demanding and self-aware; buying is no more a simple gesture, but a complex of factors which determines various consuming behaviours. The relation brand-consumer tends to situate in the proximity of the very self's history, resumed in one's values and beliefs, attitudes, motivations, cultural background, age, sex, environmental factors, past buying experiences etc. This is the moment when marketing is bound to identify needs, or sometimes even prescribe some yet unemerged; semiotics' duty is now to create messages in order to (re)direct, through a sign-communication process, consumers' behaviour. The social dissemination of the brand may turn up as an opportunity of identity construction, as related to one's role in society, but may also lead to that hedonist *hic et nunc* moment of experience which will extract the individual from day-to-day routine. The decryption of signs into emotions, along with the unique sensorial dimension one can experience when brand-consuming, might be the definition of postmodern sensibility; in 'his/her pleasure rush', the individual has to trespass a sign, which gives a name to his experience.

In respect with the syncretic act/situation of consuming, a double-sense directed *post-neologism* had to emerge and constitute a two-words concentrated term: *esthésie* (fr.), as for *sensoriel* and *sens* (J.J.Boutaud: <http://semen.revues.org/5011>). Another term as such, *synésthésie*, defines the merging of *sense* and *sensation*,

the latter – a direct consequence for emotions, which are eventually evaluated somewhat further in the equation, in more pragmatic procedures, maybe statistics standing for a company's profit or failure.

Furthermore, taste, a complex concept, debatable in urban myths & culture terms, is, on one hand, suspected to carry on a *competence* role ('*performance gustative*'), as a matter of social-layered self-constructiveness (Jean-Jacques Boutaud: <http://revues.unilim.fr/nas/document.php?id=1593>).

On the other hand, taste, as linked directly to the act of eating, becomes a question of *in-corporality*, developed into a gastronomic discourse which communicates and *self*-communicates. Taste - a matter of sharing values in a certain social space, contextualized in a globalized world where individualism reached its utmost, still a world of multiculturalist inter-action - finds people joined at the same table as standing for 'a symbolic place of exchange' (<http://cadi.lecolededesign.com>). Anthropologist Lévi-Strauss talks about a certain need of 'eating the symbolic' in order to *in-corporate* the values linked to food, ritualizing this act to the point where the individual starts to create a social identity, relating to the others.

From J.J. Boutaud's concept of *commensality* (the term finds its origins in the Greco-Roman banquet), specialists in table design along with anthropologists thought of both a social and an elementary need (that is eating together), in terms of an aesthetic manifestation (<http://cadi.lecolededesign.com>), meant to produce signs and, therefore, identities. Studying elaborately a multitude of culturally stereotypical gestures, atmosphere, sounding, codes or proximities, people nowadays seek into improving their life quality through a symbolic introspection. At this level they will become the subject and the object of a multi-dimensional *sensoriel immersion* (J.J.Boutaud: <http://semen.revues.org/5011>) in the mysteries of a certain dish and/or table atmosphere. Through the '*salivation féérique*' (Baudrillard, 1970), the individual begins to decode the gastronomic grammar, and, thereafter, to communicate his/her experience to others, encoding it into a discourse of attitudes, figurations, gestures, table conventions, proxemics, thus establishing hierarchies and eventually, self-positioning in a micro-society.

In addition to this, an exercise of taste-competence and a socially normated act, commensality mediates the communication between table companions, who may sometimes sit at a table just for the sake of enjoying themselves. The transfer from one's intimate scene to the spectacle of flavours, colors, sounds which arrive to the table in a fine-packaged narratology of a syncretical triade of image, taste and smell, determines the individual to become a seeker of sensibility and to replace instinctual needs with a *carpe diem* moment of *sense balance*.

To be semio-gastronomically fit in order to communicate value judgment on table sophistries - sometimes even on snobbish ornamental background arrangements standing for a pre-composed *leit-motif* ingredient(s) of a sense-charged dish - is a matter of both socio-cultural and taste performance. Wine degustation, a great example of decoding taste through aesthetic and cultural performance, in a social context, finds its limitations in time and space, but nonetheless, hurts the boundaries of the taster's inner life and personality. From the archetypal image of the table, offering quite a poetic discourse of the meal, to the mass industrialized food production, today's cuisine had known a refinement *in* terms of time, rather than *in* terms of practices. Frugal commensality (J.J.Boutaud: <http://revues.unilim.fr/nas/document.php?id=1593>) replaces traditional, local table manners, deritualizing and encouraging a brand new globally inculcated message. The signifiers of taste deliver their values (more specifically - qualities) to a multitude of receivers, through a grammar of marketing, where the identity of the product is encapsulated in a more or less pertinent *logo* and/or slogan.

II. (INTER)NATIONAL IDENTITY AND (RE)BRANDING THROUGH THE SEMIOSIS OF GOURMET F&B

AUSTRALIAN PRACTICES

Australia is the perfect example of the *mélange* between cultures, mentalities and flavours, reflected both economically and socially in a semiology of identity creation through cuisine practices. From the allegorical representations of specific proto-cuisine elements (bushfood), to fancy restaurants or cafés with grandiose panorama, and/or to canned seafood meals, *made in Australia* seal was a question of a long-term branding strategy, bound to localize the global and vice-versa.

Also known as a well-marketed exotic touristic destination, Australia offers a range of gourmet food specialties, which cannot describe 100% the Australian type of consumer, but which can rather (re)initialize Australian spirit from an international perspective. Getting inspiration from European cuisine practitioners, Australian chefs first achieved the *classic canons*, flavouring with an original mark of ethnicity (in the case of migrant chefs), or with a patriotic one (native chefs' case). Studies in food industry show that nowadays there is an increased demand for new concepts and trends – which would rather exploit traditional patterns of a certain country/culture, leading to the development of local products and/or regional dishes, thus varying menus and increasing high-quality of F&B Australian services (McIntosh, 1986, p. 110).

For example, with a dominating panoramic-view over Sydney's harbour, bridge and Opera House, Quay stands for an Australian F&B must-visit royalty ambassador. Peter Gilmore, executive manager and chef at Quay

restaurant, is one of the exponential figures whose cuisine and life story made Australia gain one of the best gastronomic discourse in the world. A 44 year old Australian from Sydney, P. G. engineered his success from a very early age, still never forgot, as a passionate gardener, to appreciate the very source of the ingredients that he ingeniously designs:

‘Over the years my food philosophy has evolved into a personal style that celebrates being a cook in Australia. It embraces nature’s diversity and seeks to achieve a sense of balance and purity through produce, technique, texture, flavour and composition.’ (http://www.quay.com.au/page/food_philosophy.html)

In addition to this, P.G. believes that being an Australian chef is a great opportunity to bring together through the force of imagination, aesthetics with nature, thus “drawing on a culture which embraces so many people and parts of the world” (http://www.quay.com.au/page/our_people.html), eventually a successful recipe of balancing Strauss’s dichotomy of the raw and the cooked.

Quay brand (re)lies on Peter Gilmore’s signatures, the latter (sub)-brands superposing with the former in consumers’ minds. For instance, one of the most appreciated dishes, already a legend of the lunch menu, *sea pearls*, is followed by a unique, Quay-branded concept of dessert - the guava & custard apple *snow egg*. “A collection of textures and flavours” (http://www.quay.com.au/page/peter_gilmore_interview.html), but also a question of highly refined techniques and inspiration, P. Gilmore’s dishes situate themselves under the sign of a well-marketed set of values, in respect with the restaurant’s image and food philosophy:

‘What we try to do is to produce original, beautifully crafted food with a big emphasis on layers of texture and flavours to create an overall sense of balance. Food that tastes beautiful that takes you on a journey of different sensations, that makes you think about where it came from.’ (http://www.quay.com.au/page/our_people.html)

Furthermore, the *zoon semiotikon* (Bruno Ollivier) of our times is a city predator who hunts down different leisure practices, searching into self – exploration and redefinition through socially admitted codes of senses. The territorialisation of the self/group identity in our societies can be stated by the means of signs, because it is “the sign which occupies the space of communication” (Bruno, 2000, p. 47). In this acceptance, urban space, is also “constructed through sets of myths and representations which are given meaning by everyday spatial practices” (McDowell, 1999, p. 168) and, if allowed, ‘practitioners’ as well. So, on the public arena, we may notice the presence of a socially constructed icon, the postmodern *flâneur/euse* – as a consequence of ‘the huge social and economic upheavals that wrenched people from land to land and from their homelands’ that “not only reshaped the relations between space, gender and identity but also transformed cultural representations” (McDowell, 1999, p. 153). Furthermore, nowadays, according to Bauman, the *g(r)azing* behaviour characterizes a certain group of people, seeking into hedonist practices by *in-landing* semi-anthropocentric natural sights (because marketed as touristic): for instance, the seaside flourishing bistro/restaurants industry street (showcased by the grand French boulevard).

If we put our issue in this light and also think back to Jakobson’s process of communication, we realize once more the importance of language which shapes socially an inner I through communication and integrates him/her into a certain group culture. Actually, it is the social layers which “generate linguistic forms and distinct codes which have the essential role to transmit the culture, thus conditioning the individuals’ behaviour” (Safir Whorf, Bruno, 2000, p. 84). The table itself can stand for a code-generator sign, the very transmitter of a discourse in a certain context/space, but it can very well be the context itself, a mere pretext for creating social cognition. We can assert that this is the point where the individual (*I*) ceases to relate to an antonymic entity – the *other*, and starts relating to *us* (the table companions) through a third, neutral entity (*it*) – the dish. Nevertheless, taste, a matter of social performance, is put under the sign of a linguistic one as well, acting as a connector between instances.

The relationship between the individual and the dish can be translated in Martine Joly’s term - *psychophysiology*, which develops into a memory of taste and gives value to the flavours through a lecture of image. The symbolic meaning of the Taste Image (Jean-Jacques Boutaud: <http://www.acrwebsite.org/search/view-conference-proceedings.aspx?Id=8273>) will be interpreted as a transgression from the visual text to a sensorial discourse. Basically, the consumer-individual, builds a redirected-sense signifier (taste and smell) by decomposing the structure of the visual signified, dividing the material text of the dish in several qualitative aspects: form, color, texture, composition (Martine Joly – ‘les matériaux de l’image’). Eventually, the dish advertises itself, especially if we recall more recent perspectives on advertising, for instance the 3S of the French specialist Jacques Séguéla - Simplicity, Substance, Spectacle (Brunel, 1999, p. 641).

At a first glance, the ‘reader’ of Peter Gilmore’s dish *sea pearls* will resort into making a connection between his/her mental representation of the object pearl (culturally determined) and its projection as a subject, symbolically represented by the four, circular, differently coloured pearls of this exquisite lunch. The symbolism hides a well-packaged message that is meant to label this peculiar dish with the term luxury (or gourmet), by association with the very element pearl – a luxurious concept by definition. The creator of this dish plays with textures and colours, each standing for a different species of fish, representative in a way or another for

Australian sea fauna (Sashimi tuna, aquaculture caviar, sea scallop, smoked eel, octopus, mud crab, and abalone). Still, from P.G.'s concept of cuisine – *food inspired by nature*, we realize how this dish proves its authenticity and Australianness through the very origin of the whole concept: the Australian South sea pearls – as a species and a raw material at the same time. A sign of distinctiveness meant to produce associations that will linger in the consumer's mind.

A Spectacle of Substances, though a demonstration of elegance and Simplicity, *sea pearls* becomes a moment of experience, a matter of texture discourse reiterated from a sensorial perspective into a linguistic one - a must for social sharing. Perhaps this is the moment when the individual-tourist sits at the table of the *other* and tries to depict beyond its *exoticism* (from Greek *εξωτικός*, *εξω* = outside, foreign, different) a certain identity/inland and in-corporate it to the Self. From postcolonial studies point of view, (if we think about Australian history and construction), a country's cuisine may mean not only a *rendez-vous* with the prone-to-be-tamed *other* (the food of the strangers is considered an act of 'anti-eating' [Evseev, 1994, p. 100] in anthropologic terms), but rather a *rendez-vous* with the Self (<http://www.lemangeur-ocha.com/compte-rendu/le-gout-des-autres/>), in the name of table sharing, cuisine exchanges and borrowings, eventually a recipe for knowledge.

III. TOWARDS A 'PATRIOTIC MARKETING' ECONOMIC STRATEGY

Generally speaking, cuisine represents one main landmark either for an independent culture or for an emerging one; consequently, Australian food producers understood that only a strong message, mass-produced and consumer-targeted would refresh Australian economy and also create a cultural brand for a touristic destination. From Bush Tucker (aboriginal dish) to Australian gourmet products, a long-term plan had to be designed in order to invert the roles of the triangle I-Other-Us and challenge an entire world of consumers with the question 'How Aussie are you?'

Patriotic marketing was seen as a necessity for a country which brings about a *post* in its history, a country with a mixed population in growth, still a country with a great touristic potential - a counterpart in times of crisis. *Not Only Australian Made but also Australian Grown and Owned* (Dick Smith:<http://www.dicksmithfoods.com.au/sites/dicksmithfoods/files/aussie-grown-foods.pdf>) proposes Dick Smith, the 1986 Australian of the Year entrepreneur, businessman, aviator, and political activist, also the founder of Dick Smith Electronics, Dick Smith Foods and Australian Geographic.

'*As Australian as You Can Get*' slogan translates a national economic strategy: "We will not stock products from foreign owned suppliers. This means that we are supporting local communities and most importantly the profits stay here in Australia" (<http://www.dicksmithfoods.com.au/store/our-story>). On the virtual General Store, Dick Smith also reassures his clients that not only employment would be thus reinforced, but also the final cost of a non-imported-raw-material-manufactured-product is definitely more profitable for all the market actors. A reasonable solution for avoiding 'extreme capitalism' (Dick Smith: <http://www.dicksmithfoods.com.au/sites/dicksmithfoods/files/aussie-grown-foods.pdf>). On the other hand, what Dick Smith exports, packaging quality and authenticity by the means of advertising and marketing, is "a celebration of the finest gourmet foods that Australia has to offer from places like Tasmania, Kangaroo Island and Margaret River" (Dick Smith: <http://www.dicksmithfoods.com.au/sites/dicksmithfoods/files/aussie-grown-foods.pdf>). Globalizing the local; in other words, a differently contextualized post-modern way of trying to envisage that '*we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us*' (John Winthrop): "Australia has become successful, thanks to immigrants from all around the world, who have started and grown businesses here" (Dick Smith: <http://www.dicksmithfoods.com.au/sites/dicksmithfoods/files/aussie-grown-foods.pdf>).

Dick Smith food product's discourse relies on linguistic and visual codes which are specially designed to de-nominate a taste referent. A web of allusions, pretexts and empathies, Dick Smith Food brand slogans try to identify social needs that would arise from and within the elementary need of eating. For instance, the latest campaign, *Does your company give Christmas Hampers at Christmas time? Well ask your Boss, How AUSSIE are YOU?*, is a two-directional approach, from motivational theories perspective. Personnel management studies showed that some individuals get more motivated - and consequently, have improved results - if they share the same group values. So, on one hand, the message of the slogan emphasizes on this social need of common value sharing at the working place and/or even the *in*-personalization need of a company's philosophy. On the other hand, the rewarding system in human resources proved to be one of the most efficient so far and can be distinguished in: materialistic-targeted, and psycho-socio-professional and self-esteem targeted (also linked to the virtual socio-hierarchies that appear *within* the socio-professional group – see again the American psychologist Maslow theory and motivational theories). Briefly, a Dick Smith Christmas Hamper rewarded Australian employee, should be more motivated as he/she self-esteems for being included in the club of gourmet national flavours fans, but nonetheless, for being reassured that he/she can share an intimate value (patriotic consuming – Australian owned and produced food) with the community of the work place – a value also labelled as such by a supreme authority – the boss.

In addition to this, the idea of giving a *name* to a taste experience can be (re)demonstrated with the Dick Smith's range of products/hampers. A collection of original Australian flavours, these gourmet products challenge the consumer not only at the level of the imagery of taste, but also at the level of linguistics, as each thematic product has associated a *name* - standing actually for a brand in marketing terms – and, therefore, a *story* which can eventually be translated with *identity* in cultural studies terms. For example, The *Other Chef Preserved Lemons* mustard tells the story of 'a chop preserved lemons finely with parsley and sprinkle over lamb shanks for an unusual supplement to a traditional meal. They are beautiful served with Chicken, fennel and green olives' (<http://www.dicksmithfoods.com.au/store/product/other-chef-preserved-lemons-350g>). *Terra Australis Australian Mango* chutney is a (re)collection of a 'full rich taste of mango with a sharp, slightly spicy undertone of pure delight to make a tropical fantasy' (<http://www.dicksmithfoods.com.au/store/product/other-chef-preserved-lemons-350g>) - a quintessential symphony of Australian exoticism. Other examples of exotic Australian geographical landmarks can be found in *Dame Nellie Melba* hamper (sweets): Raspberry Burst Yoyo's from Yarra Valley Crumbs; Cranberry & Pistachio Nougat Bar from Bettanay's; Small Timber Crate made in Emu Plains; Tart Coulis (raspberry sauce) from Redhil Mud, and so on.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

This voyage at the extremes of meaning, that frames taste and its manifestations as a social signifier, may demonstrate the fact that *le signe gustatif* is responsible for One's identity construction through the very communication with the Other(s), either if we talk about the Self as one entity, or about a multitude of Selves that together build a culture. Situated at the crossroads of creativity and history, the Australian identity translated by national cuisine-practices demonstrates the working together of the cultural codes of communication, which generated a discourse shaped by semiotics, eventually packaged in a narrative of marketing; this was meant to encourage a type of consuming that made possible Australia as a brand, either in terms of food, or in terms of touristic destination – patriotic eating.

The culture of space in the era of globalisation redesigns a discourse of desire through sensorial experiences such as taste. Nevertheless, travelling towards self-exploration involves rational issues, such as probabilistic Brownian movements of the demand-supply market, closely surveyed by specialists whose insight into a plurality of selves reflects the consumer's/tourist's/individual's changeable behaviour in respect with its generative factors. In our case study, it is obvious that at a certain point of the diagram, Dick Smith's or Peter Gilmore's 'visible hand' of the market-strategy lead to a profitable communication for all the Australian market agents, at a certain moment in time. Eventually, the emotion of sign-consuming at the table of the Other, may encourage new perspectives on the touristic branch of leisure commensality, as a means of cultural and economic mutual (ex)change.

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