

AUTHENTICALLY VAGUE

AS 'AUTHENTIC' BECOMES A HOT WORD ACROSS MENUS AND RESTAURANTS, BRIAN STEEL PICKS APART WHAT THE TAG ACTUALLY MEANS IN TERMS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND FOOD CULTURE.

DISCUSSIONS about authenticity and food often centre on national cuisine, dishes and ingredients, with sidebars into globalisation, history and tradition. However, in the case of authenticity, the levels of complexity are infinite, and emotions often run high.

Some argue national cuisines are recent creations with multiple influences, and all tarnished with some external influence. Others believe that cuisines are mostly built outside a nation, and they only go as far as the regional. Some theories suggest that a national cuisine is intrinsic to the culture, with the association based solely on the proclivity of the dish in question. But no matter what your opinion, there is a long history of associating food with a nation, with character and personality, and with powerful links to core dishes.

Realistically, if you look back far enough in any national cuisine you can always find significant contradictions and differences. In Japan between 675 AD and 1872, the consumption of beef and chicken was banned by the emperor. There are ongoing debates about the origins of pasta – ranging from

Africa, the Middle East and China – but one thing is certain; it did not originate in Italy.

The now ubiquitous chicken tikka marsala is a contrived dish, modified to suit the English palate by throwing in a tin of tomato soup, but now appears on menus in India. Chilli con carne and spaghetti bolognese are significant distortions of dishes with little resemblance to the original. The quintessentially Scottish haggis didn't originate in Scotland, and there are multiple identical dishes scattered around northern Europe.

Imagine for a moment how many national cuisines would be fundamentally changed without the presence of tomato, potato, paprika, chilli, vanilla and chocolate. You could argue that the global dispersion of these ingredients has probably influenced, to one degree or another, just about every cuisine on the planet.

There was no tomato in Italy before the mid 1500s (pizza and pasta sauce), there was no chili in Indian cuisine (curry), no chocolate in Belgium or France, nor potato anywhere in Europe (gnocchi, dauphinoise). No corn (chowder), no vanilla (creme anglaise), no capsicum (romesco sauce).

Of course, with enough historical flexibility you can effectively prove that all cuisines are invented, but that would be missing the point of the cuisine that becomes significant and enduring enough that it is innately associated with a specific nation. If we suddenly decide that a cuisine must remain totally unchanged from its inception in order to be considered national, then there really are no national cuisines. This would be like defining



a nation by one specific ingredient at one moment in time.

Cuisine is so much more bound by culture, tradition and society than it is by actual ingredients. You really don't have to look very far to find the significance of food in any culture. Perhaps if a cuisine is eaten widely enough – locally and globally – and if it retains the foundational ingredients, flavours and symbolism inherently linked to a nation, then you have a national cuisine in spite of the modern effects of globalisation and the location of consumption. In simple terms, national cuisines or dishes should penetrate every socio-economic group



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to be authentic: effectively, dishes that are cooked in the home.

In today's global village, authenticity is about more than dishes, countries, and geography, and it is certainly not a simple discussion. Whether you apply the word to your service model, your menu or your general theme, it's worth doing to ensure your business and your approach are linked to your vision. ■

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