



## Food Festivals and Expectations of Local Development in Northern Italy

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### ABSTRACT

This essay offers an ethnographic analysis of the role of food in modern Italian food festivals. Starting from the ethnographic case of Borgonovo, a rural town in Southern Piedmont, and its festival, it highlights the nonlinear role played by food in the festivals and points out gastronomic festivals should be read as a local response of rural, and marginal communities to the phenomenon of their social marginalization.

**KEY WORDS:** Italy, food, local development, tourism, ethnography

### Introduction

Beer Festival, Pumpkin Festival, Buffalo Festival, Fiazein Festival, Cheese Focaccia and Trofie pasta with Pesto sauce Festival, Donkey Agnolotti stuffed pasta, Gnocchi pasta Festival... and the list goes on to complete a long column in the upcoming events section of the local newspapers. During the last years, the ritual calendar of a typical weekend in the province of Alessandria, in the north-western part of Italy, consists of this sort of frenetic list stuffed with gastronomic events. By looking at the many newspaper and billboard advertisements of the local cities and towns, it is possible to recognize the outline of a gastronomic landscape, a foodscape, drawn by the names of many small villages recognizable thanks to food products and preparations which are both traditional and modern. The case of the Piedmont region is a good example to understand the nationally-wide cultural

phenomenon which is characterizing the whole Italian country. This phenomenon puts Italy in a more general framework, shared by all the Western countries, where the gastronomic proposal, in particular the one of the festivals, has become crucial in the development of the local tourism (SILKES – CAI – LEHTO 2013). Italian food festivals are surely various: they include festivals with an ancient history, in which the food proposal is the result of a philological research, and festivals where food is neither from the territory nor is rooted in the folk tradition, but resulting from a research for an exotic, bombastic and extemporization proposal conducted by local private or public actors. As a whole, if we take into accounts these events in a wide framework related to the dietary habits of the Italians and its transformations (DI FRANCESCO 2015), they tell us about a change in the many local communities of the country, the many “little Italies” (cfr. BORGHI 2017), which are looking for fame, cultural and social recognition otherwise impossible without their food festival proposal. This essay studies the phenomenon by analysing the forms of the contemporary ritual in order to discuss the role that food plays in these events.

The essay begins presenting the research conducted since 2006 in the Piedmont region and its methodologies. It introduces the contemporary food festivals through the ethnographic case of Borgonovo, a rural town in Southern Piedmont, and its festival. The analysis highlights the constituent anthropological elements of the contemporary food festivals and the role of food plays in them. The research points out gastronomic festivals should be read as a local response to the phenomenon of marginalization which makes the rural villages experience (FONTEFRANCESCO 2015a) playing the role of a crucial bridge element suited to consolidate the link between the towns and the more interior rural communities of Italy.

### **The Research**

Italian food and cuisine are internationally well-known and made Italy the world’s main destination for food tourism in 2018 (GARIBALDI 2018). Differently from other European countries, such as France, Spain or more recently Denmark, the fame of Italian cuisine does not derive by the success of specific gastronomic movements, such as Nouvelle Cuisine, Molecular cuisine, or the New Nordic Cuisine. Rather, it is linked with the discovery and promotion of the regional, popular cuisines (CAPATTI – MONTANARI 2003: 41-98). The most famous example is the Mediterranean diet that has popularized the main traits of Naples’ peasant cooking tradition since the 1950s (MORO 2014). Local, environmental and cultural embeddedness is the main distinguishing trait of the culinary Italian tradition. Its richness in foods, preparations and styles derives from its diverse landscape and the fragmented political

history of the country (CAPATTI – MONTANARI 2003; PARASECOLI 2004). In particular, the prolonged political control of the Italian territory by other foreign countries deeply influenced the development of Italian regional cuisines (HELSSTOSKY 2004). This peculiar history made the peninsula a fundamental place of cultural and gastronomic hybridization; a creative milieu whose products are the subjects of a growing international demand. The demand focuses on specific products that, not only in all Western markets, dominate specific sectors, such as pasta, salami, cheese and wine (CAMILLO – KIM – MOREOC – RYAND 2010; GIRARDELLI 2004). These products are or originate as local delicatessens, deeply embedded into specific geographic areas of the country. Thus, to understand Italian food and food culture requires to look at the local dimension of the communities (CAPATTI – MONTANARI 2003; NIOLA 2009). While cities such as Rome and Milan are innovative centers for what concerns the development of new forms of food (industrial) production, distribution, and consumption, it is mostly the semi-urban and rural areas that play a key role for food rediscovery. Cases, such as the recognition of Alba as one of the UNESCO World's Creative Cities for its gastronomy or the recognition of Mediterranean diet as UNESCO World's Heritage (MORO 2014), as well as the international success of the Slow Food Movement (PETRINI 2007; INGERSOLL 2011), confirm the relevance the rural space holds for Italian cuisine.

The food products that are mostly subject of international visibility and interest originated from rural gastronomy in which they were mostly special food for festive occasions (GRIMALDI 2012: 23-42). While peasant culture has been deeply affected by the twentieth-century social and economic transformation of the country, which left those communities facing the effect of an increasing marginalization, the products maintained their relevance becoming the center of specific initiatives of promotion (GRASSEN 201); the most common of which is the organization of food festivals. The festivals are a common folklore institution present across all the Western countries, and deeply rooted into traditional agricultural economic and social activities being the ideal successors of the medieval and modern seasonal markets and the harvest festivals (DI FRANCESCO 2013). In festivals, Howell Ciancimino points out, food is a fundamental element of rituality, reinforcing the social cohesion of the community and contributing in creating the very spatiality of the event (HOWELL CIANCIMINO 2018). Moreover, Di Francesco shows that in modern ceremonies, food turns into a commodity marketed in a touristic perspective (DI FRANCESCO 2013). Overall, thus, rural food festivals are not just simple folklore institutions but geological windows through which to study the dynamic relationship between local community, food, tourism, and the wide world. Food appears at the center of this complex network. However, the social and cultural outline of its role appears not to be clearly

defined by the ongoing academic debate.

This paper intends to offer a contribution in this direction, ethnographically sketching the multidimensional and nonlinear (cfr. DE LANDA 1997) role of food in present Italian food festivals. In so doing, it draws from an ethnographic research begun in 2005 and focused on the studies of the historical and folkloric origins of gastronomic festivals in northwest territory of Italy and, particularly, in Piedmont. The research moved from a first focus on the grape harvest festivals of the region and, specifically, an ethnographic study of the Grape Festival of Lu, in 2005-2006 (FONTEFRANCESCO 2014). From this first study the research expanded and encompassed the wider area of south-eastern part of Piedmont, being involved in two projects promoted by the University of Gastronomic Sciences: the *Atlante delle Feste Popolari del Piemonte* (Atlas of Popular Festivals of Piedmont) (GRIMALDI – PORPORATO 2015), a database that documents more than one thousand and hundred celebrations in the region; and the *Granaries of Memory* (GRIMALDI – PORPORATO 2011), a digital collection of memories about the Italian and foreign gastronomic knowledge through the stories of the life of farmers, local producers, entrepreneurs, workers, defining a complex and articulated social portrayal of our contemporary reality.

The research was conducted following a composed methodology aimed at mapping, surveying and then exploring the social phenomenon of gastronomic festivals. Fig. 1 summarised it.

First, the festivals were identified through a review of media and literature sources. The main aim of this first action was to identify the present scale and extension of the phenomenon in the Province of Alessandria. I looked at the past ten years (2008-2017), considering the festivals reported in the news, in review articles, and advertisements. The research focused mostly on online newspapers and the folkloric literature. Based also on the data provided by the *Atlante delle Feste Popolari del Piemonte*, the phenomenon was mapped, highlighting the consistency of the phenomenon, across the province of which the introduction offered a sample. Similarly to what happened in other parts of the region (FASSIO 2009), the research highlighted a proliferation of gastronomic festivals, less and less linked to the times and the rites of the local farmers' calendar, but increasingly targeted to create on the one hand a tool of social cohesion as a reaction to the progressive depopulation of rural villages, on the other to provide a new way to promote the territory (FONTEFRANCESCO 2015b).

The research continued in an ethnographic perspective, conducting observation in thirty festivals across the province. The observation was conducted in the days when the festivals were held, conducting short, semi-structured interviews with the organizers and the participants. The interviews focused on the exploration of the motivations that drive the

participation to the events. During the observation, material documentation such as flyers, leaflets, etc., was collected.

In selected locations, among which was Borgonovo, the ethnographic research was furthered and extended in order to include also the observation of the preparation of the event and its aftermath. The research included also archival research, in order to study the historical development of the rituals, and extended interviews with the organizers. Collecting data through food-centred interviews with the organizers of the festivals, the research has envisaged how today the connection between gastronomic proposal and territory works. The narrations have allowed me to investigate not only the origins or motivations that lead to the organization of these contemporary rites but also the cosmos of affectivity and meanings that define the human, gastronomic and natural landscape, which is the environment of the community.

In other occasions, I have already had the opportunity to explain part of the research results. As the current imaginary trend is to consider them as originating in a historical horizon biased between a distant Middle Ages and the irrefutable topicality, I have emphasized the fascist period as the main point for experimentation. In that period, throughout the national territory and, particularly, in rural areas, ceremonial forms appeared for the first time to totally bind the topic of local agricultural and economic development to the organization of the village fair, considered as moments of promotion for short or long-distance tourism (FONTEFRANCESCO 2014). Herein, in order to deepen the connection between the festival proposal and the perception of marginalization, I am going to introduce this topic presenting an example of these manifestations, the case study of Borgonovo through the ethnographic tale which is narrated in the present tense, typical of the narrative genre (VAN MAANEN 2011: 45-72).

The name of the village – part of the Piedmont's province of Alessandria – was replaced by a fictitious one to guarantee the festival organizers' confidentiality and anonymity; it is here considered as an arbitrary location (CANDEA 2007), a localized community to be the object of ethnographic research aimed at the identification of the fundamental characteristics defining, on the one hand, the system of the festival and on the other hand its anthropological meaning.

### **Borgonovo Festival**

Summer 2015. For the first time a food festival is organized in Borgonovo. The initiative is born as an answer to the impulse given by the new local government (elected the year before) and by the commitment of the local Proloco, a local grass-roots association that aims to promote the place.

The aim of the festival, according to the organizers, is to promote the little village by involving local community in the organization of a unique summer event based on a gastronomic proposal. Therefore, the festival is born with a clear social purpose by setting the festive experience as a fundamental piece in a broader strategy useful for the community and aimed at facing one of the more pressing problems pointed out by the local community. One of the residents, a woman owner of an economic activity, has so explained: “Borgonovo is becoming depopulated. [...] It has become the outskirts of the city [...] a desert. We must do something, mustn’t we?”

The food festival takes place at the beginning of August, because this is a period of holiday for most of the people who interrupt the productive activity and can come back to the native village to spend their holiday. Indeed, in the year Borgonovo is now mostly populated by commuters or pensioners: the community is reduced to a few tens of people, mainly elder ones, who meet at the bar, in the parish, or at a friends’ house. During the summer, instead, especially from the end of July to the beginning of August, the village revitalizes, being populated by many families from the village whose second house is there. Therefore, August is the period in which many inhabitants who emigrated in the last fifty years from rural locations to towns and cities in northern Italy come back to the area. As a consequence, the food festival aims at involving not only these seasonal inhabitants but also the entire village in the time of its maximum vitality; in fact, the programme is enriched in a period of the year otherwise very poor so as it was traditionally in the ritual rural calendar of Borgonovo before the great migration of the second half of the twentieth century.

The Proloco organizes the event taking inspiration from the other communities of the area and from the success met by the other festivals. Because the gastronomic element appears to be a great way of attracting the attention of the audience, the association has decided to propose a gastronomic festival too. They have proposed a manifestation which covers the entire weekend: a marquee tent, kitchens and tables were set up; the menu proposed was an expression of a substantial culinary mix that has local dishes with evident gastronomic heterotopies. By using black ink on yellow phosphorescent paper, the culinary mix of the “Sagra di Borgonovo” (Borgonovo food festival) is presented: agnolotti stuffed pasta, polenta, risotto, mixed fried fish, grilled meat, wine of the territory. Foucault defined

heterotopies as those “spaces which in some way are in agreement with all the others and that, however, contradict all the other places” (FOUCAULT 1998:310). The offered menu is in a sense an odd proposal; it seems to be contradictory if we think about taste and food, but it responds to a fundamental trait of economic and local agricultural history. Borgonovo is situated on a plain, a few kilometres from the hills. Viticulture has disappeared for a long time in favour of a massive cereal growing. Actually, in the seventies, Borgonovo has been one of the many villages that made the province of Alessandria a “granary of Italy” because of the excellence of its territory considering the quantity and the quality of cereal production (BELTRAME – BRAY– CRAVERO – MARCHESE 1981:127-140; ROCCA 1992:79-80). However, in the new millennium wheat and other cereals have lost profitability and, consequently, their space, so new horticultural cultivations have begun to cover the plain. The community has started to question the experience of cereal cultivation, searching a pristine typicality and originality, able to make this village original in the territory; but this research has not given solid answers to the local community. Wheat, actually, does not appear to be a means capable of communicating and valorising the reality of Borgonovo since, as one of the organizers, a farmer in his seventies, states: “We can’t just do the bread festival? What sense would have? We do not even have a bakery here...” The heterotopic menu, therefore, tells us about this social, cultural and economic history; a new ludic function of tradition that is expressed thanks to the gastronomic element, creating a way to project into the future. Indeed, because of the difficulty to identify a unique gastronomic element, typical of the territory and, as a consequence, able to characterize the food festival, the organizers have decided to copy partially the menus of the festivals of the neighbouring villages, but also to invite the Proloco associations of neighbouring towns to submit their specialities, thus proposing a smaller edition of the famous Asti’s “Festival of the Festivals”, an event that has involved over 40 Proloco groups of the nearby Province of Asti since 1974. To complete the programme, the Proloco di Borgonovo has included a rock concert for younger audience and a dance evening of ballroom dancing for the more mature audience. Even the choice of music has been made following the settled example of the other villages.

The community of Borgonovo and the audience coming from the near villages and towns have appreciated the food festival, even if it is not particularly innovative. Several hundred people have attended the event, some of them because of the novelty, while others for the possibility to visit a town that for the first time has been advertised. The panorama of the event has been characterized by several things: the conspicuous presence of families and friends sit at the tables to eat or waiting in front of the marquee tent where food is prepared, the unpretentious service which is typical of food festivals, the smells of food preparations, agnolotti and chopping boards of cheese, polenta and fried fish, tiramisù and wild boar stew,

all wet with red or white wine, cola and sparkling wine: a babel of men and food representing the feeling to the abundance of the festival, poetically described by the verses of the Alessandria poet Giovanni Rapetti: “ra fim 'd cudghein and còj vian the èua rcv pit pulèinta 'nsima dl'ass suta who tuca”<sup>1</sup> (RAPETTI 2016:38).

The following days the organizers have commented positively, even though they are not sure that there will be other editions of the event because of the necessity to be supported by other associations of the neighbouring villages. Overall, they have reinforced their “awareness that to relaunch our villages, food is essential” as explained by one of the members of the organizing committee. This statement, however, is not shared by the audience: some interviewed citizens, who have come for the first time to the village for the event, have mainly reminded the pleasantness of the occasion and the annoyance of mosquitos, while they have just had a faint memory of Borgonovo and its community.

### **The ingredients of the festival**

If considered in the frame of an ethnographic research, Borgonovo history delineates one of the many Piedmont's gastronomic festivals which the scientific anthropological community has dealt with (e.g. BONATO 2006; BRAVO 2005; RENZO 2005; FASSIO 2009; GRIMALDI 2012). Many of these festivals – as the Borgonovo one – have a recent story; or they copy a model already working; or they prove to be something new in a local ritual calendar. Other festivals count tens of re-editions and their organizers recognize their origins in a mythical past. The indicative summary of this varied panorama is provided by the *Atlante delle Feste Popolari del Piemonte* (<http://atlantefestepiemonte.it>, access 29/11/2018) including the 107 counted festivals. Through the analysis of this knowledge base, it is possible to enlarge the ethnographic reasoning identifying a clearer profile of this contemporary folk system.

Firstly, it is clear that food festivals are feasts, even if they have lost their original religious trait, as it is still evident by the etymology of the Italian word for festival that is *sagra*. This comes from the Latin word *sacra*, sacred. This etymology, in a historical perspective, highlights the profound link and commixing between religious and profane activities that

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<sup>1</sup> The smoke of a cotechino which makes mouth water, polenta on top and now come on, whoever's turn it is.



characterized ancient and medieval rituality (GRIMALDI 1993). However, it points at the anthropological role played by the festivals in the society. If the “sacred” is an alternative vision and understanding of the world that challenges the ordinariness of everyday experience (ELIADE 1999), festivals are a moment capable of altering the everyday-life space and time on different experiential levels (APOLITO 2014). Surely, the festival turns the urban space by altering the fruition and the functional geography, using areas otherwise precluded or ordinarily used for other functions (squares, roads, sports fields) as meeting places and commensality, commerce, dance, artistic fruition. Secondly, the festival calls for an experiential and sensorial modified landscape, marked both by the significant presence of people and food and cooking smells. It follows that, thirdly, the body experience and discipline is transformed and adapted to the occasion, creeping and interacting among people, the more appreciating uncommon dishes in the daily diet, dancing, singing, abandoning the daily composure.

The festivals are lay holiday moments happening above all in the summer season. Historical festivals related to food, such as Fat Ox Fair, or Aosta St. Orso Festival (GRIMALDI 2009; SIBILLA 2001) are organized in the winter season (Christmas, Carnival). However, the food festivals are mainly planned in the summer period, from May to September (DI FRANCESCO 2013; FASSIO 2009); and this can be considered as a heritage of the traditional folkloric system of the harvest festivals as an opportunity for commerce, exchange and consumption of local products. Furthermore, as in the Borgonovo case, these events are the answer to the contemporary demand of gastronomic tourism which concentrates outdoor consumption – as well as the tendency to a form of consumption in non-residential places – in the summer season, when it is easier to enjoy warmer and sunny days (GARIBALDI 2018).

In a food festival the lay moments are prevalent, nevertheless they can be juxtaposed to religious functions, such as Masses, processions and benedictions. This fact distinguishes the contemporaneity from the rituality, typical of that world of tradition (GRIMALDI 1993). Especially, while the peasant festivity was characterized by the collective participation in all the ritual moments and the community identity was created through this kind of participation (BRAVO 1984), nowadays the summer-event programmes are perceived and enjoyed selectively. By way of a menu – to use a gastronomic metaphor – the contemporary man chooses “à la carte” according to his taste. In spite of this, the festival characterizes itself through the gastronomic element, recovering and making relevant the anthropological model of the banquet (DIETLER – HAYDEN 2003), and enriching it with several activities: religious (e.g. Mass, benedictions, processions), entertainment (e.g. exhibitions, shows, theatrical performances), and civil solemn moments (e.g. public speech of the authorities, prize-giving ceremony, parades). In this programme it is possible to recognize the legacy of

the medieval and modern model of the yearly fairs which distinguished harvest and production time in each community. Where such events, however, happened in the frame of an agricultural or manufacturing process deeply set in the society of the time, the current festivals appear as economic heterotopias, tourist products suited to satisfy the search of the general contemporary urban public for other and elsewhere (AIME – PAPOTTI 2012:113-160). These festivals exalt the food and the community, but the selected products to be valorized in the menus have often no bearing on the local community hence ignoring the territorial and seasonal products in favour of media coverage.

An ethnographic example of this trend is offered by the Aubergine Festival in Quargnento (in the province of Alessandria), observed between 2014 and 2016. This festival was founded in 2004 by a citizens' committee in order to create a new and original social gathering at the end of summer. The festival programme, during the last weekend of August, has three days of gastronomic events focused on the use of a vegetable: what is worth to note is that neither the village nor the nearby areas have a culinary tradition. Surely, the choice of the aubergine was not based on the idea of promoting a territorial production; but it was based on the aim of attracting the attention of the general public bringing a notorious product already served but still appreciated nowhere in the province district. Nowadays the festival is at the 14th edition and it is promoted and organized by a network of territorial associations. The entire community participates in and a significant number of citizens are involved: more than a hundred volunteers in a town of about 1,500 inhabitants. The festival is also well-known in the province since tourists come from all the major towns around and the cooking faces an average of more than one thousand places.

These “ingredients” outline the essential features of a folk system firmly set in the contemporary background; this is the consequence of the clear combinatorial power which is peculiar to the popular world (BRAVO 1984; GRIMALDI 1996). The ludic reinvention of the tradition is made topical through the festival, by meeting local social and cultural requirements and by creating a holiday system; this system is often felt as continuity between the present day and the ancestral collective past. In those terms, as suggested by Handler and Linnekin, tradition is not a naturalistic and philological datum but a semiotic phenomenon, in which “the relationship of prior to present representations is symbolically mediated, not naturally given it encompasses both continuity and discontinuity” (HANDLER – LINNEKIN 1984: 287). It is about a semiotic game which turns to the present looking upon the future and not the mere reproduction of the past. Food plays a key role in this process.

### **The food of the festival**

Some case studies such as Quargnento and Borgonovo are examples to show that in the present festivals the strong connection between territory and gastronomic choice has disappeared (DI FRANCESCO 2013). This fact is also confirmed by the published Manifest of the Authentic Food and Wine Festivals (CAVICCHI – SANTINI – BELLETI 2013); the publication is a wide-ranging document, suitable to suggest the need for a return to a gastronomic and folkloric proposal closer to the typicalities of the local communities (FONTEFRANCESCO 2015b). In broad terms, the current festivals emphasize a complex role of food, in which its meanings, its practices “share space but cannot be mapped in terms of a single set of three-dimensional coordinates” (LAW – MOLL 2002:1). In the discursive space this complexity opens, it is possible to find, nevertheless, some major paths which define the role food plays for the communities.

First, food is the element which produces and strengthens the local identity narration; indeed, is a metonymic phenomenon which – through the gastronomic proposal – enables to experience local area, its characteristics, both within its borders, among the citizens, and outside, among the inhabitants of other villages. To organize the festival of the grape, as in the case of Lu, a small town in the province of Alessandria, is to emphasize a particular idea of the connection between the territory and the identity: a product such as grapes and wine is put at the centre of the festival meanwhile there is no narration about other geographically meaningful aspects, as for example the cultivation of wheat (FONTEFRANCESCO 2014). Therefore, already in the selection of the products the hierarchy of community values is indicated: it analyses, selects and sets local tangible and intangible features defining the public and identity image in a broader dialectical model. In this model the power the festival must involve, entertain and meet organizers' expectations, the community and attract tourists' attention is opposed to the costs and revenues, which are issues of the business approach.

Furthermore, food is evidently the element with an aggregative power. In the communities the citizens meet to organize the event and to feast. Tens of people rally to organize a festival; generally, there is a primary committee composed by a Proloco association in order to handle them (DI FRANCESCO 2013). Starting from the primary group, participation rises involving directly a growing number of persons in setting the location up, cooking, serving, managing performances. This proactive collaboration not only creates the anthropological conditions for the festival experience (APOLITO 2014), but corresponds with a reactivation of the bonds of sociality among the different groups and members of the local community, therefore confirming the role of social reconstitution which was already typical of folkloric traditional holidays systems, such as Easter collections (GRIMALDI 2012:84-117): while in the case of

such practices the feast reconstituted the unity of the community after the disintegration caused by the winter seclusion, in the case of festivals reconstitution takes place counterbalancing the effects of the daily or seasonal commuting, typical of the contemporary society (GRIMALDI 1996:13-40).

At the same time, the influx of strangers ideally widens the boundaries of the community allowing other non-local people to share. This participation increases both the tangible and intangible assets of the territory. Therefore, the food festival becomes on the one hand a commercial ethnic resource, ethno-commodity (COMAROFF – COMAROFF 2009:20), whose selling increases the territorial economy, on the other hand a way to create a relational context which re-bathe the local community in a broader social context. If, in fact, as suggested by Ferguson, in a global interconnected world the disconnections perceived by the community are significant (FERGUSON 2002:234-254), the intention of creating – through a festival – a new and strong interconnection between the local community and the wide world in order to reinforce the territorial context proves the progressive sense of erosion and marginalization experienced in particular by the smaller villages, as shown in the case of Borgonovo. The festival is a community instrument used to counteract this weakening, ordinary affects (cfr. STEWART 2007). Thanks to the creation of a tourist flow the opportunity to shorten the ideal distance between the centre and the outskirts arises, thus emancipating the communities from a perceived anonymity. This need for renewed centrality is not, however, a feeling only relevant to the present, if we consider that those festivals born in the 1960s, such as the Lu Festival of the grapes (FONTEFRANCESCO 2014), have had the same aim. In the last two decades, owing to the acceleration of the urbanization in the Italian peninsula, the phenomenon has been stimulated and multiplied. In this framework, it is worth noting that, as in the case of Borgonovo, a festival emphasizing the culinary element and not a broader participation in the community life, risks being limited in its effectiveness: the food satisfies an appetite but not the hunger.

## Conclusions

The food of the festivals is therefore a complex, nonlinear, never obvious reality. As it may seem heterotopic, sloppy or wrong, it always tells about the society of the present and the challenges that local communities are facing. This contribution has an ambition to highlight this anthropological datum by selecting the elements that characterize the rituals of these festivals and their food based on the research work being carried out in north-western Italy

through the ethnography of the Borgonovo festival, as well as from the archival research and the wide fieldwork carried out over the years.

Where the current public debate has repeatedly focused on the distinction between authentic food festivals and “fake” ones, here it is highlighted how the food of festivals always deals with territory, even if not through the lexicon of proximity or in coherence with the history. Also, the gastronomic heterotopias state a more and more pressing challenge for smaller communities and for smaller villages: they must counteract a growing sense of marginalization that the rural villages live. The food becomes the instrument to create a bond between centre and peripheral, rural areas; a tool that is modulated and adapted for this aim, to respond to the pressing need for “other” and “elsewhere” that struggles our urban communities.

This work can answer the questions of an observer of the present about the meaning of an alluring “potatoes festival”, compared to that of a “Festival of mixed fried seafood” of a territory in the Po valley: if it is true that these are indescribable choices according to the eye of the gastronome, while the anthropologist focused on contemporaneity can see in those foods not only exotic divertissement, but the common goods which can become tools for the creation of a possible future; a hope on the tip of the fork. Highlighting this vital link between the festival and the community glance at the future, the food festival is not only a glamorous event, but it is – more than ever – an object characterized by a deep political meaning that develops in the not-always-linear interaction of actors: local administrators, not-for-profit associations, producers, patrons, etc. This plurality of subjects is characterized not only by differences but often also by requests, desires and ideality; in addition, this multiplicity is potentially conflictual because of the requests focused on achieving the ideal of future that each subject aims. In this sense, the festival becomes the synthesis of multiplicity wherein the gastronomical choice is an integral part. Therefore, the food of festivals has also a political flavour whose first aromas have been “offered” by this article, and the future researches will characterize it better.

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