The 'raw', the 'cooked' and the archive

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Introduction

The production, preparation, distribution and consumption of food holds a central position in the development of societies. Food is a primary necessity for human survival. Apart from its physiological importance, food is also a cultural phenomenon. As the French epicure Jean-Anthelme Brillant-Savarin claims, "Gastronomy governs the whole life of man."[1] In this case, sustenance is more than the energy necessary for the body to survive. As a cultural object, food is a means through which humans communicate values, knowledge and beliefs.

Food, according to Arjun Appadurai, is "a highly condensed social fact" and "a marvellous plastic kind of collective representation".[2] It is an important channel permitting a better attempt at self-understanding; a revealing means of understanding our behaviours and our social interactions with other humans. Precisely because of such communicative powers, food is "good to eat" but also "good to think".[3] The validity of both statements enticed scholars to venture beyond the significant attention paid to the history of ingredients through an exploration of the material and symbolic meaning of food in society.[4]

This article[5] refers to some of the developments in food-related historical research as much as it is about the importance of the role archives and archivists play in the same research process. Researchers spend endless hours looking for any fragment of information that could throw new light on the past. During this process, the researcher works very closely with the archivist. As a front-line source of information, the archivist informs about those collections that could potentially help the researcher meet the research objective. However, the dialogue between the archivist and the food researcher is now becoming increasingly difficult as food historians have started to venture in rather complex forms of interpretation, asking for sources that are not necessarily food-related in their nature.

Let us assume that a better understanding of the historiography of food studies informs the archivist of the adequacy of the archival repository for food-related research projects. Developments in food-related research sheds interesting light on how the trained researcher employs archival collections whose role and purpose is not necessarily considered of direct importance to food studies. With this understanding in mind, the 'raw' [food related evidence], the 'cooked' [interpretation of the evidence using an interdisciplinary approach that goes beyond the more traditional political and economic interpretation of factual information], and the archive come together. While the researcher needs to lay down any ground-work research to tap the potential of the archive, the archivist should have all the necessary tools to continue to assist the researcher in ensuring that no stones are left unturned. Apart from the online catalogue or any available indexing system, the archivist plays an important role in guiding the researcher through those potential sources that could possibly lend themselves well for the project.

Food as celebration - a tea-party given at the Colonial Restaurant in Valletta to 100 school children on the occasion of the coronation of George VI in May 1937 (National Archives of Malta)

The assumption above is somewhat far-fetched. The confluence between the 'raw', the 'cooked' and the 'archive' is rather vague and not always easy to achieve. Is it possible for the archivist to correctly advise the researcher, especially in extremely specialised areas, if unaware of such developments in those same specialised areas of research? And while it is humanely impossible for the archivist to be such well-informed, how should the archive tap into the expertise of the researcher? These reflective questions emanate from two decades of direct collaboration with the National Archives of Malta as a researcher interested in food-related projects.

Food historiography: an overview

The earliest recognition of the potential associated with food studies comes down to us through the work of several anthropologists and sociologists. Incidentally, these same social scientists have highlighted the importance of history when trying to understand the development of food-related cultural meanings. The works of Sydney W. Mintz, Jack Goody, and Stephen Mennell analyse food from a historic-materialistic approach. Sidney Mintz studied the production and consumption of sugar to understand the links between capitalism and industrial build-up in Europe, and the associated British colonial expansion in the Caribbean. Jack Goody's research, touching over the three continents of Europe, Africa and Asia, highlights the interdependency, as well as the significance of food production, class and eating practices. Clearly influenced by Norbert Elias' *The Civilising Process*, sociologist Stephen Mennell researched food practices and developments in table manners in France and England from medieval times to the present day. This study allows the possibility of both

foresight and hindsight since emphasis lies squarely on the abandoning of the medieval gluttonous behaviour to a more rational attitude at the table. These studies are testimony of how anthropologists and sociologists have employed archival evidence to further knowledge that goes beyond the most obvious political and economic determinants in understanding past societies. However, the same could not be said when food historians tried to publicise their food-related work.

"I should, perhaps," remarked Reay Tannahill, "remind readers that this is a history book, not a cookery book", and urged them "not to experiment with the foods described herein".[6] These words of caution have some significance when considering the context within which Tannahill's book, *Food in History,* was published. As a matter of fact, Tannahill's contribution marks one of the earliest studies of food from a historical perspective. Its readability ushered a new beginning in the study of food, an already established area of research among other social sciences. When the first edition of *Food in History* was published in 1973, the *New York Times Book Review* stated; "Here at last is what may serve as the first text book for what should become a new sub-discipline; call it Alimentary History".[7]

These reflections encapsulate the challenge food historians had to contend with for several more years to come. The 'cooked' approach to food research-based projects was met with a lot of opposition. Introductions to food related studies often included statements intended to validate the legitimacy of this area of research towards the better understanding of culture.[8] Resistance came from the general public, but especially from among fellow historians. Although the concept of change forms an integral part in any historian's research project, historians are often quite reluctant to accept new fields of research that try to infiltrate into the mainstream of traditional historical practise. A cursory

Food as satire - a carnival float in Valletta in 1931 (National Archives of Malta)

GMR 45 249

Return of the number of families relieved by food or money through Government Officers, acting under the Sanitary Committee during the Cholera of 1850., shewing also the number of houses of the poor limewashed & cleaned at the public expense during the same period.

	Poor families relieved	Houses of the poor limewashed
Valletta	61.	40.
Floriana & Msida	6.	4.
Three Cities	344.	138.
1st District, Country	17.	22.
2d ditto — ditto	34.	37.
3d ditto — ditto	84.	42.
4th ditto — ditto	18.	18.
5th ditto — ditto	57.	11.
6th ditto — ditto	48.	11.
7th ditto — ditto	124.	64
	793.	387.
Gozo	24.	42.
Total	817.	429.

Sanitary Committee
Valletta, 23d December 1850.

Reg: Scully
Lor: Ly: Bp: Portelli
P. N. Tabone.

Detailed report on families supported through government funds and food during the 1850 cholera outbreak (National Archives of Malta)

look at historiographical literature indicates how several food historians constantly felt compelled to justify their area of research, particularly since the use of 'raw' unconventional sources of information, such as cookbooks or civil and ecclesiastical court trials, diminished the importance of their studies.[9]

Evidence of such resistance is revealed in several reflective comments on the history of food writing in general, specifically when scholars discussed food culture. One salient remark penned by Roy Porter in his preface to the book *Bread of Dreams* by Piero Camporesi, warns the Anglo-American reader about the nature and approach of Camporesi to his work. Porter explains how this could pose a challenge since it could come across as exotic and lacking those basic qualities still largely agreed upon by traditional historians.[10] In 1999, Peter Garnsey recognised how recent works by historians studying the social, religious and cultural function of food and its metaphorical uses were not recognised for their contribution towards historical inquiry. Could it be, as Giovanni Rebora argues, that the cultural history of food as a discipline was not as yet highly developed?[11] Or is this just simply a question of 'taste' since Fernández-Armesto questions how the history of food culture is "relatively unappreciated"?[12] It is significantly difficult to measure such thoughts especially since the researcher would also come across positive comments, such as those of Albert Sonnenfeld. A contemporary of Garnsey, Sonnenfeld believes that the culture of food is a recognised area of study. In his 1999 seminal work *Food. A culinary history from Antiquity to Present*, Sonnenfeld described the history of food culture as "moved to the front burner".[13] Since then, food studies gained significant ground among historians and no longer considered as 'invisible' in academic history.[14]

The contributions of food historians towards the understanding of food-related functions, roles, meanings and usages of past societies are today recognised for their worth. The 'cooked' is now an interdisciplinary approach to food studies, including cultural historians too. The rapid development, with all its different strands and schools of thought, is best encapsulated by Scholliers' figurative representation of a "cosy hut" with segregated spaces (1960s-1980s), that transformed itself into a "welcoming house" with accessible rooms (1990s-2005) and now experiencing expansion.[15] Today, argues food historian Peter Scholliers in his study *The Many Rooms in the House*:

> food history inhabits a large house with many rooms, with the occasional remodelling of a new room. This history is very visible from a long distance. It is busy and noisy, and lights are on day and night. It looks solid and gleaming, and many people from all over the world pay it a visit. Its confusing atmosphere, which is caused by the many rooms with very different people, conversations, and ambiences, may worry some visitors. Not many other buildings accommodate such a varied collection of people who all wish to contribute to the writing of history of food. Some dwellers consider food as their main (and sometimes only) concern, whereas others pose questions in which food plays a subordinate role.[16]

The Maltese case-study aligns perfectly with these observations. Food related studies, although still in their infancy, have been gaining "front burner" attention. Nevertheless, this change of faith is unfolding at a relatively slow pace.[17] One of the biggest challenges in this regard is related to the demands of the research process itself. Researchers are required to consult different sources whose mention of food is often only accidental. Consequently, researchers in the field are spending a lot of time collaborating with archivists in trying to explore those potential documents that could "populate" the "many rooms in the house". The archivist cannot be expected to know the current trends and practices in food-related research, especially since the

"house" is increasingly becoming rather complex to navigate.

'Cooking' food-related sources

Food-related research is now attracting more attention. The proliferation of published material discussing a myriad of food-related themes is only one aspect of this change of faith. General interest in the history of food is further enriched through a panoply of television programmes, internet sites, Facebook pages, international organisations, exhibitions, historic cook-along and fairs. In academia, food history has established itself as part of food related university courses, colloquia, workshops, symposia and journals.

The current recognised status should not be solely attributed to the intensification of published material. Anthropologists, sociologists, linguists, nutritionists, psychologists, geographers, philosophers and archaeologists regularly include aspects of food history in their studies. Sociology and anthropology focussed the historians' attention to the socio-cultural meanings of food as an act of sharing. These recent developments indicate how the historian adopted new theories, methods, approaches and even a language of food-studies when researching the food culture of past societies.

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies in food-related research employ sources of evidence whose nature and origin are not necessarily directly food-related. The occasional secondary mentioning of food presents the researcher with the possibility of giving a 'voice' to socio-cultural aspects of entire societies long since gone. The contemporary cultural historian aspires to analyse and narrate aspects of daily life which often pass unnoticed. As "a house with many rooms" the researcher is today looking at food-related aspects that are 'cooked' in an unprecedented shape and form. While food studies researchers have spent a lot of energy identifying the history of ingredients, new approaches use the same information to narrate a different story. Concepts surrounding production, distribution, processing and consumption, otherwise known as foodways, are forming the basis of contemporary research projects among food historians.

Caroline W. Bynum's and Rudolph M. Bell's research explains how medieval women adopted fasting to establish their place in society.[18] Joan J. Brumberg and Caroline M. Counihan suggest that the close association of women's identities with the rejection of food, amid its universality, had changed its meaning through time.[19] An element of continuity within this female rejection of food is that women still use food as a language to seek emotional comfort. Female restrictions of food and the acceptance of hunger remain to be central features in the construction of female identity. These studies have inspired other researchers to explore issues related to body, image, identity and power of men and women in past societies using methodologies often ascribed to anthropologists and sociologists.

Material culture has also moved away from a Marxist-determinist approach. Sarah Pennell and Bee Wilson have brought to light an important aspect of food-related material culture.[20] Continuity and change in the development of kitchen tools persists as an area of interest. Originally, kitchen tools were often simply described for their economic worth. Kitchen equipment lists are now considered as indicators of "social capital".[21] Until recently, cooking implements have been isolated from any form of human connection. Eating and cooking utensils are as intimate as the meaning associated with the internalisation of food. Today, considerations are made to the thought process governing the acquisition of such tools as another way to understand how humans consume food in its widest sense.

Research projects, like the examples mentioned above, shed interesting light on how the history of food has developed into a "house with many rooms". The rapidly growing interest in food related

PRELIMINARY REPORT ON AN AGRICULTURAL SURVEY OF MALTA AND GOZO WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO INCREASED FOOD PRODUCTION DURING WAR-TIME.

AUTHOR

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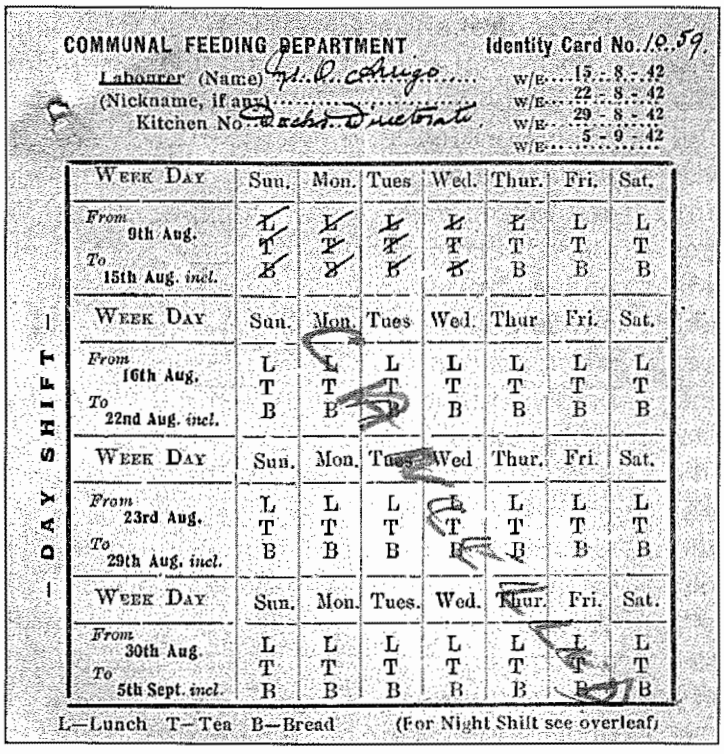
AGRICULTURAL SALES MANAGER, IMPERIAL CHEMICAL INDUSTRIES, LTD., SECONDED TO THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE FOR DUTIES AS AREA EXECUTIVE OFFICER, CHESHIRE WAR AGRICULTURAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE - AUG. 1939 TO DATE.

DATE OF VISIT TO MALTA

TUESDAY 29th SEPTEMBER 1942

TO 17th OCTOBER 1942.

Preliminary report on an agricultural survey of Malta and Gozo with specific reference to increased food production during war-time (National Archives of Malta)



COMMUNAL FEEDING DEPARTMENT Identity Card No. /0.59

Labourer (Name) Gio. P. Cahugo

(Nickname, if any)

Kitchen No. Rachel Directorate

w/e 15 - 8 - 42
w/e 22 - 8 - 42
w/e 29 - 8 - 42
w/e 5 - 9 - 42

DAY SHIFT

Week Day	Sun.	Mon.	Tues	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.	Sat.
From 9th Aug.	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
	T	T	T	T	T	T	T
To 15th Aug. incl.	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Week Day	Sun.	Mon.	Tues	Wed.	Thur	Fri.	Sat.
From 16th Aug.	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
	T	T	T	T	T	T	T
To 22nd Aug. incl.	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Week Day	Sun.	Mon.	Tues	Wed	Thur.	Fri.	Sat.
From 23rd Aug.	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
	T	T	T	T	T	T	T
To 29th Aug. incl.	B	B	B	B	B	B	B
Week Day	Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thur.	Fri.	Sat.
From 30th Aug.	L	L	L	L	L	L	L
	T	T	T	T	T	T	T
To 5th Sept. incl.	B	B	B	B	B	B	B

L—Lunch T—Tea B—Bread (For Night Shift see overleaf)

World War II Communal Feeding Card
(National Archives of Malta)

projects involving specialised interpretative approaches generated new challenges for both the researcher and the archivist. While the researcher contemplates on the nature of the information required, the archivist is constantly challenged to adequately advise the researcher on the potential of the available sources. As a result of these new demands, the seasoned professional researcher is spending endless amounts of hours consulting documents. Thus, the experienced researcher becomes the front-line expert informing the archive about the potential of the collection within the repository.

The archive

The archivist is a collaborator, sometimes the initiator of a research-based project. An initiator simply because the archivist's knowledge and familiarity with the collection provides the researcher with possible avenues towards the exploration of untapped documents. However, the researcher is another important contributor towards the better understanding of the collection available for research. The professional researcher often consults documents that several would have discarded as unimportant simply by looking at the catalogue. Themes in food-related research can sometimes be explored through sources where the reference to food is only secondary. For instance, several are under the impression that one of my research interests is about bread in the early modern period. However, very few know that I had focussed on bread to understand gender identity in eighteenth century Malta. Admittedly, I have learned a lot about the whole grain-bread cycle and have already made contributions specifically about the history of the product. But more importantly for my project, grain and bread became the 'voice' that brought to light gender relations within the early modern household. I still recall the worried faces of the caring staff of the National Archives querying about whether I had come across any information that could lend itself well for my interest. And then the puzzling looks in response to my positive answer since the documents I chose to consult had been previously used by researchers to study different types of crimes or aspects of daily life in early modern Malta. It was precisely during these moments that the seeds were sown for a collaborative future.

The National Archives of Malta have generated a culture encouraging an open dialogue between the archivist and the researcher. This collaborative atmosphere has made it possible for the researcher to bring to light several interesting aspects of food culture. Researchers are provided with opportunities to explain "the rooms of their house" and encouraged to advise on the potential of the collection. The possibility to discuss allows for the researcher to inform the archivist of the constantly changing "house". The complexities of interpretation and the historiography of food are unpacked in a manner that the researcher would both inform but also get informed about collections which meet the needs of a research project.

This open dialogue manifests itself best in the opportunity for the researcher to act

as a Citizen Archive.[22] In other words, the National Archives taps into the expertise of the researcher and generates those platforms which entrust the researcher to act as a front-line exponent to communicate the research potential of the collection. Such opportunities also allow for the propagation of information about ongoing research projects among a wider audience. The researcher is involved in orientation sessions for other researchers interested in specific areas of research. Since food studies in Malta is relatively in its infancy, the role of the experienced researchers helps attract and assist other researchers to explore unventured territories of food-related topics. Consequently, the National Archives strives to celebrate the research based on the sources found in the collection, empowering the researcher to carry the flag for the Archives.

The possibility to showcase research could be considered as the extended arm of the archivist. Presenting the collection with a specific link to the "house with many rooms" allows for this collaboration to guide interested researchers to specific documents. To a certain extent, these volunteers could be viewed as an 'outside' service provider of information, facilitating specific research projects through collaboration. The Archive Citizen continues to bridge the work of the archives with more potential researchers. This task should be considered as an addition to the workshops, public lectures, tours of the archives, educational visits, and information sessions. Such manifestations continue to inform the public on several levels, going beyond the narrow remit of informing other researchers. The expert researcher forming part of this outreach programme could also inform the public of different ages in an experiential exercise employing modern approaches to educational processes. Eventually, the confluence between the 'raw', the 'cooked' and the archive becomes a harbinger towards a better understanding of the National Memory project.

Conclusion

There is no other single actor on the stage of history which is as meaningful as food. Food is a vector of life, a promise of salvation and a marker of social mobility. It is a measure of governance. Food is also loaded with a lot of spiritual charge. Language endowed it with symbolic meanings. Thus, food is a metaphor of human experience. For the cultural historian food becomes a prism that radiates the totality of that same human experience.

It is precisely at this moment when the researcher and the archivist engage in an important dialogue. As before the 'raw' could become 'cooked', the formal and informal discussions between the researcher and the archivist could further facilitate research in very specialised areas. The collaborative front allows for the dissemination of information, increased awareness about the archive and its potential and it encourages more researchers to approach the archive to further their research interests. As a Citizen Archive, the researcher could constantly inform about the vibrant "house with many rooms". As soon as the 'raw', the 'cooked' and the archive embrace a collaborative approach, the Archives continue to manifest their important role of safeguarding important concepts related to memory and identity.

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21 For an interesting discussion of 'social capital' see *Food and Material Culture*, Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2013 (Devon, 2014).

22 The term 'Citizen Archive' is not new and has different functions and meanings for different archives. For instance, in Pakistan individuals are nominated to speak about important events in their lives during the early years of the country, an oral history project intended to provide different interpretations of the past. In this case, the archive is still playing a leading role, inviting the public to provide information to further enhance the oral history repository. The invite also enhances the idea that the citizen is empowered to provide the sources towards the perpetuation of a National Memory. In the United States, the public is invited to tag or transcribe documents associated with documents linked to particular events or personalities. The involvement of the public is again what propels a broader participation towards the popularisation of archival records.

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