Unbound Edition

Food Labeling, Labeling Food

MANON F. HERZOG February 2014

Davis

CULTURAL

Unbound Edition

Food Labeling, Labeling Food

MANON F. HERZOG February 2014

Davis



© 2014 DAVIS BRAND CAPITAL & UNBOUND EDITION PRESS

Food Labeling, Labeling Food

MANON F. HERZOG

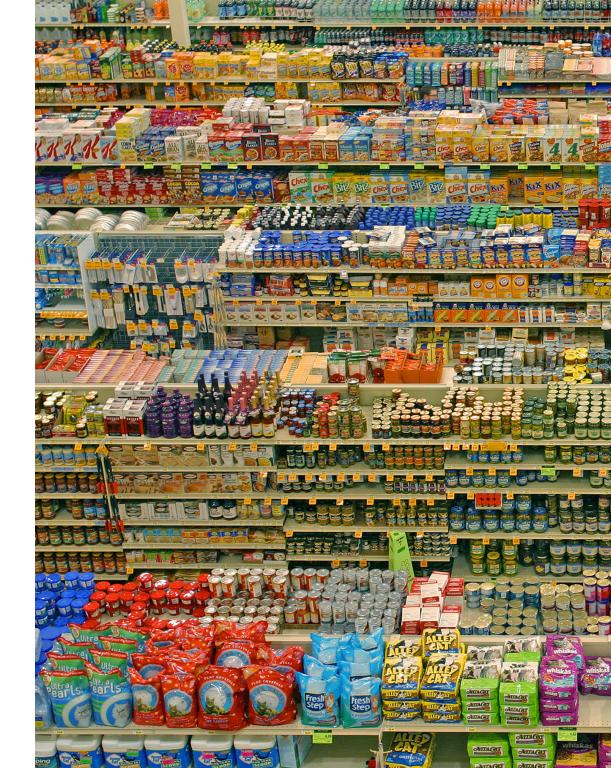
At the start of 2014, the University of North Carolina, Greensboro hosted the Atlantic World Foodways Conference.¹ The event was remarkable in quality and diversity of thought and an excellent example of partnerships between non- and for-profit organizations. In particular, The Fresh Market, a specialty grocer headquartered in Greensboro, is to be commended for co-sponsoring the event.

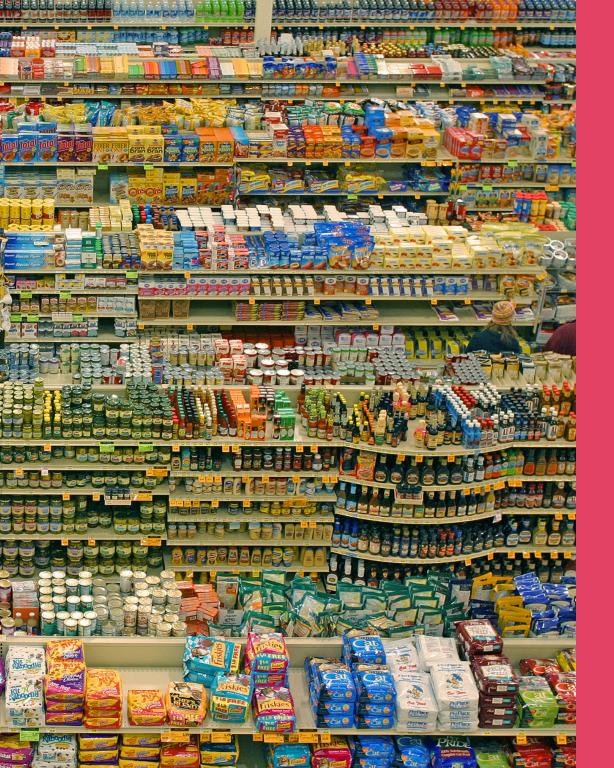
The conference offered a feast of ideas, both sobering and uplifting. One recurring theme that really stood out was that of food labeling – how we label food from a cultural perspective, and what these labels say about the current marketplace and us.

3

CULTURAL UNBOUND EDITION VOICES

We live in a time in which 70,000 new products were released in 2013 in the U.S. alone.² Not surprisingly, with this abundance, we have an inherent desire to make sense of this bountiful world. So, we label and claim it.





It turns out, however, that most of what we claim as *regional, authentic,* or *ours* is, in fact, not. For example, the Portuguese introduced tempura, largely considered a typical Japanese specialty, in the 16th century. Grapes didn't grow in Switzerland until Cesar's troops brought them to the Valais, a region perfect for growing vines. And the beloved Florida orange was born out of pomologist experimentation, not pure sunshine.



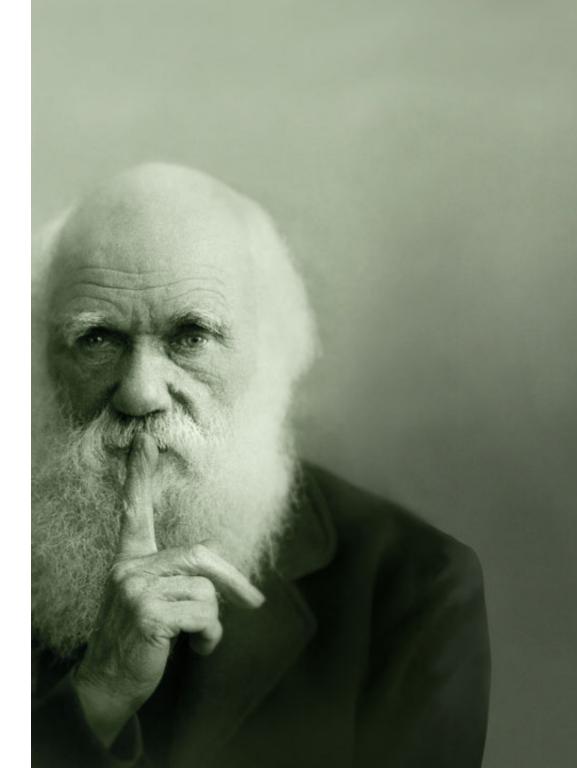


Food quite literally tells the story of humankind.

Much of the so-called "low country" cuisine we see in stores and restaurants is the product of migration,

forced and otherwise.

It follows then, that the desire to label foods is a human impulse. We constantly try to name things in order to own them. Consider taxonomy, the static classification of living things spearheaded by Carolus Linneaus, or the more dynamic view put forward by Charles Darwin and some of his more radically minded contemporaries.³ Both were attempts to make sense of an ever expanding, layered world.

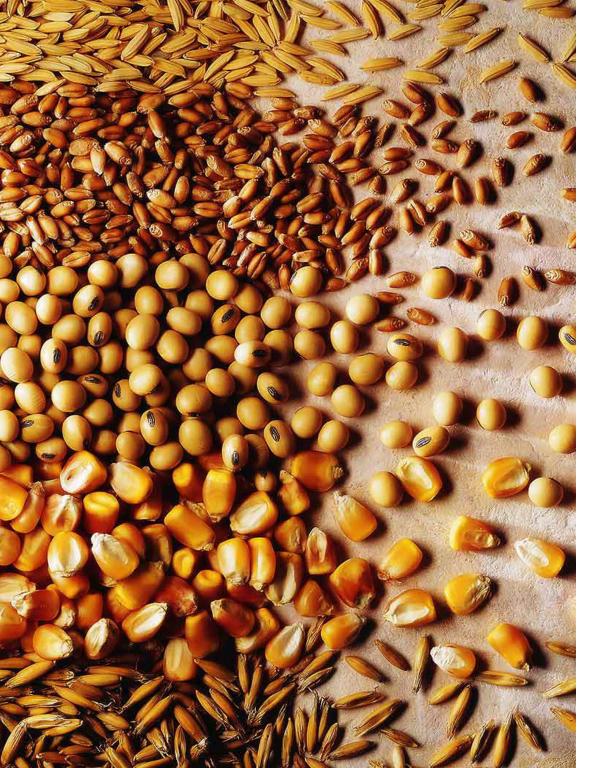




Today's labels – regional, authentic, artisanal, heirloom and heritage – function as shortcuts to differentiate brands and help consumers make decisions. The issue with this approach, however, is two-fold.

First, such labels run the risk of creating a fake, static food culture.

Secondly, labeling renders real, human stories as clichés.



Several speakers at the conference addressed these issues. To many, "heritage grains" simply means non-GMO grains, but as Scott Romine, professor at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, points out: "... as a matter of statistical probability, heirloom grains are most often not (as the name would imply) inherited, but rather purchased. As consumers, we farm out the inheriting to someone else, with whom we then exchange money for the grain in question."

In the South, "heritage grains" also is a loaded term, given its ties to the trans-Atlantic history. Romine goes on to say, "The selective remembrance isn't accidental, because if you're paying heirloom grain prices, you'd rather associate the product with a vibrant melting-pot exchange than with the world of, say, 12 Years a Slave."⁴

Selective remembrance and cultural editing is evident in other places as well. As an example, Marcie Ferris, associate professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, points out that the image of the city of Charleston in the 1920s was a brand strategy and PR feat of major proportions. Food was the key ingredient of this brand, Ferris describes, combined with "white nobility, black service and southern hospitality." Placing food itself squarely and solely with the "lady of the house" was one of the most blatant acts of mislabeling and misappropriation of the food culture, as many of the delicacies served and revered around the country were not "hers."⁵





Today, the drumbeat of the food counter-narrative is focused on the individual experience – the opposite of the anonymous, wholesale labels we have historically affixed freely. On his long journey to becoming a chef-farmer, Matthew Raiford of Gilliard Farms⁶ recounted how his desire to become a chef was met with pessimism by his family, who feared he would never be more than "a cook." When he became a chef in spite of the odds, people reduced him to "black specialties," such as mac 'n' cheese and greens. It wasn't until he started farming his family's land and exploring his grandmother's recipes that he found his true culinary voice.

Or, consider Corleone, Sicily. If you have ever followed the epic tale of the Corleone family in Coppola's *The Godfather*, you might wonder what there is to know about the place other than its notoriety as a mafia stronghold. A younger generation of Corleone's citizens and Anthony Fragola tell us in a forthcoming documentary, *Another Corleone*, *Another Sicily*.⁷ Spoiler alert: the other Corleone is one where lands confiscated from the mafia are now farmed by cooperatives.



Given our compulsion to appropriate and own food traditions, where is the opportunity for the food industry? The human desire to label won't change and, with the explosion of food offerings, we will likely see more labeling.

So, what to do?

There is a clear opportunity to evolve the static, fake labeling system much like Darwin turned the system of classification into a dynamic, more authentic one. Food companies can and need to embrace the individual and the universal experience food affords us. Some have already started doing so, as the examples of Gilliard Farms, Corleone and The Southern Foodways Alliance⁸ show. But the appetite for more transparent and real experiences is big. From research, we know that a large percentage of U.S. consumers don't cook frequently yet devour food content. In fact, they treat food knowledge as social currency.

Given what we know, isn't it time to push beyond the McCulture⁹ some of us observe in all kinds of places, as well as the outdated labels of "ours" and "theirs"? Isn't it time to acknowledge that nothing is static or truly "ours" but the experiences we share as families, communities and world citizens ... that the age-old, ongoing exchange of foods has created an immensely rich culture, which evolves everyday?



- 1 http://www.uncg.edu/eng/awrn/AtlanticWorldFoodways.html
- 2 Most Memorable Product Launches of the Last Year. boston.com, February 2014. http:// www.boston.com/business/news/2014/02/07/most-memorable-product-launches-the-lastyear/ucjNyolz9bylgJf8ZDpl6M/story.html
- 3 http://anthro.palomar.edu/animal/animal_1.htm
- 4 Scott Romine (University of North Carolina, Greensboro) Against the (Heritage, Heirloom) Grain: Foodways as Cultural Brand
- 5 Marcie Cohen Ferris (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) Edible Charleston: Selling the Lowcountry Brand in the Early Twentieth-Century South
- 6 www.gilliardfarms.com
- 7 Another Corleone, Another Sicily. Anthony Fragola, February 11, 2009. http://www.youtube. com/watch?v=yr8EYLYt6TA
- 8 www.southernfoodways.org
- 9 Welcome to Our McCulture. huffingtonpost.com, February 10, 2014. http://www. huffingtonpost.com/tim-elmore/welcome-to-our-mcculture_b_4760443.html?utm_hp_ ref=media@rir=Media

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Manon Herzog is an accomplished global brand strategist and manages many of Davis Brand Capital's most complex projects. She is fluent in multiple languages and understands the challenges of building brands that resonate worldwide. She writes on cultural, social and arts issues for Unbound Edition.

> MANON F. HERZOG @Manon_DBC

> > 32

Davis Brand Capital develops, manages, values and invests in leading brands worldwide.

For nearly two decades, *Fortune 100* and category-leading clients worldwide have turned to Davis for clarity on complex questions surrounding brands.

As a comprehensive brand consultancy, we place equal emphasis on the strategic, economic, cultural and creative aspects of brand development and management.

Davis Brand Capital Atlanta New York Saint Louis Washington DC

> davisbrandcapital.com (404) 347-7778





UNBOUND EDITION PRESS

UnboundEdition.com