

Creating the taste of place in the United States: can we learn from the French?

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Abstract In the United States, there is a growing awareness of the implications of our globalized food system, a system that incorporates all manner of agriculture, food distribution, food processing and transformation, and consumption. The ever increasing distance between where our food is produced and where it is consumed has helped spur a movement to develop a system of place based foods. Right now multiple models are in play, including farmers markets, community supported agriculture, and the localvore movement. This article will do a close examination of another model from France, the French system of *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC); nationally regulated by the French Ministry of Agriculture it supports and protects foods and drinks with unique links to particular territories. The AOC system is based on geographically distinct and historically specific food and drink found throughout France. By closely examining one AOC product—Comté cheese produced in the rural agricultural region in Jura—the authors consider the possibilities for an AOC-style system in the United States.

Keywords Local foods · Globalized food system · Quality labels · Certification · Terroir · France · United States · Cheese

Introduction

In the United States, there is a growing awareness of the implications of our globalized food system, a system that goes from farm to table and includes the crops that are grown, the food processing and distribution systems, and of course, consumers. Increasingly, our modern global system has compartmentalized each of these domains, separating how and where food is produced from where it is consumed. This compartmentalizing impulse, primarily a consequence of the economies of scale considered necessary for success within a capitalist economic system, has thus changed the relationship Americans have to both their food and their geography. The bounty of the harvest, for example, is more of an abstract notion than a lived relationship to the agrarian landscape. The consequences of this change are both practical and cultural; today, there is no region of the country, as rural sociologist Thomas Lyson (2004) pointed out, that “can be said to be even substantially self-sufficient in food production.” American consumers now interact with food primarily at the supermarket, where they engage with thousands of food commodities as they decide what to make for dinner (Hendrickson and

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Heffernan 2007). Consumers know little about food as it moves from farm to table, especially given that food travels, on average, 1,500 miles before it ends up on the dinner table (Barndt 2002; Pollan 2006). Therefore, an awareness of the origins of most foods is neither an everyday practice nor an important part of everyday knowledge.

However, there is a growing movement that counters our placeless relationship to food and responds to increasing consumer demand for products that incorporate new dimensions of quality. In both the United States and abroad, many variants of the “buy local” movement (i.e., “locavores,” Community Supported Agriculture, farmers’ markets, place-based food labels), have focused on forging connections between producers and consumers and increasing consumer awareness of the origins of their food. In this paper, we look at a particular type of values-based food label, the French Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée (AOC) system. Established in 1935, the French AOC system offers important insights for interested parties all across the food system who want to build stronger relationships between food, people and place.

Geographies of food and drink

The global recipe for our American meals, combined with long-standing government regulations that privilege large scale commodity production, means that developing strong associations between how food is made, where it comes from, and the every day buying practices of consumers is no small task. The local foods movement operates as a series of varied interventions at every stage of the food system. One set of initiatives, known collectively as “values-based labels” (e.g., fair trade, geographical indications), have explicitly tried to link the local and global components of the food system, while creating broader guarantees of quality for consumers. These labels are a unique variant of the “buy local” movement, since it is precisely the passage from local to extralocal (regional, national, or international) markets that prompts the need for this type of certification (Benkahla et al. 2005); yet, at the same time, the mechanisms for producing, processing, and selling these products are most often locally-based. It is our belief that these types of labels and certification systems provide spaces in which local actors can resist the globalization of agricultural

production, by allowing local actors to maintain control over the production process while continuing to access global markets.

In the United States, values-based labeling initiatives are fairly piecemeal, usually addressing a single component of food production and rarely incorporated into national food and agriculture policy. We must look elsewhere for a model that is fully integrated across the food system. One possibility is the French system of *appellation d’origine contrôlée* (AOC) system, which protects foods and drinks with unique links to particular territories. The AOC system also now serves as the basis for the European Union’s policies on Protected Denominations of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indications (PGIs). All of these systems protect place-based food and drink names (e.g., Champagne, Roquefort cheese, Prosciutto di Parma) that convey the geographical origin of agricultural products, their cultural and historical identity, and the use of specific production practices.

By rooting production in a particular place, AOC labels are seen as a source of resistance against the homogenizing effects of “placeless” food systems. The AOC system has potential benefits for both producers and consumers. By providing information on the place, as well as the process, of production, AOCs provide a guarantee of quality for consumers. By preserving traditional agricultural practices and ensuring that the bulk of activities associated with the production and sales of a particular product stay within the region, AOC labels can also contribute to rural development and the maintenance of small farms and artisanal production methods.

The beginnings of the AOC system can be traced to the early 20th century, when agricultural groups, particularly *vignerons*, appealed to the French state to protect unique French products from international competition. The primary purpose of the first law, established in 1905, was to protect against fraud; those who “falsely attributed the location of origin of the merchandise as a way to sell their goods” could be punished by law (Trubek 2008). However, this legal decree did not specify *what* made certain locations unique. In 1908, using Champagne as an example, the law was made more specific, and stated that a delimitation could only be established for a wine that had an association with a region that was “local, loyal and constant” (Ibid.). Champagne was

awarded the first delimitation in 1908. The “Champagne region” was identified and mapped, and only wines produced in that area could be sold with the label “Champagne.” This was the beginning of a system of protection and promotion for French wine that was eventually expanded to include cheese and other food products.

The early laws did not take into account any notions of quality; there were no specific parameters related to how the wine should be made or how much could be produced and sold. In 1935, the law was amended to take these issues into account, and this legislation was responsible for the creation of a new regulatory agency within the French Ministry of Agriculture, the Institut National des Appellations d’Origine (INAO), which was responsible for overseeing all aspects of establishing, monitoring and promoting wines awarded AOC status. Although for many years the INAO focused exclusively on wines and spirits, in 1990, the mission of the INAO was extended to include dairy and other food products as well. A total of 561 AOCs are currently registered and protected in France, of which 474 are wines and spirits, 48 are cheeses and other dairy products, and 39 are other food products (e.g., olive oil, meat, honey) (INAO 2007).

An AOC designation entails far more than just a set of geographic boundaries. First, from its very inception, the AOC system has rewarded the *collective* agency of a group of producers. AOC protection is only granted to a group of producers; individuals or corporations are not eligible. As of January 1, 2007, all of the collective organizations of AOC producers must be recognized by the INAO, which ensures that each group has a clearly-defined mission and respects the essential principles of “representivity” and “democracy” in the structure of the organization (INAO 2007). The group of producers submits an application dossier that outlines the production specifications and explains how the quality of the product is linked to the *terroir* of the region.¹ If the producers’ dossier is accepted, the Ministry of Agriculture then delineates the boundaries of the AOC territory. As sociologist Elizabeth Barham

points out, this process, which starts locally, is codified nationally, and then has implications for global markets: “the new appellation is now protected as the collective property of the producers, as well as part of the agricultural, gastronomic and cultural heritage of France” (Barham 2003).

The second key characteristic of the French AOC system is that it recognizes only products with a clearly defined link to the *terroir* of a very specific region. Traditional production methods and the presence of an organized cooperative of winemakers in a region may create the initial impetus for deeming a certain area a “controlled appellation,” but this is not enough. The INAO also insists on determining accurate boundaries (either administrative, or preferably, natural) that define a unique geographic area. So, for example, the AOC Faugères region is known for a soil dominated by schist, while the AOC Pauillac region is known for its deep, gravelly soil. Given the complex relationships between environmental, agricultural, and culinary practices that play out in the evolution of product, a diverse group of actors (including geologists, geographers, soil scientists, plant scientists, food scientists, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians) is often involved in the delimitation of an AOC boundary. Tasting panels are used for all proposed AOC foods and wines to determine the “*typicité*” (or shared sensory dimensions) of the product, and these tasters can have a say in the final specifications.

The AOC system’s insistence on these two elements—the strong collective organization of producers and a clear link between *terroir* and quality—are what offer the potential for a system that can benefit producers, consumers, and the environment. By relying on a collaborative, interdisciplinary process, the AOC laws ultimately protect *both* the natural and human elements involved in creating these distinctive food and wine; this system valorizes people, place *and* taste. Furthermore, the structure of the AOC system offers the possibility for the local control of production practices, quality, and product distribution.

A case study of Comté cheese

The fundamental assumptions of the AOC system in France involve a specific geography, a collective set

¹ The dossier goes first to a regional committee of the INAO and then, if approved, to a national committee. The National Committee then appoints a review committee which includes professionals from the submitting region, and this committee ultimately makes a recommendation to the full National body.

of practices, and a certain relationship between the geography and the taste and quality of the wine, or cheese, or other product. An in-depth look at a food with an AOC designation can help in an exploration of the possibilities for creating a place-based food and drink system in the United States. The following is a case study of Comté—an AOC cheese made in the eastern part of France, near the border of Switzerland. Comté is the largest AOC cheese in France, in terms of volume, and is also widely recognized as one of the most successful, in terms of maintaining collective organization and preserving traditional practices and environmental resources in the AOC region.

There is a long history of cheese production in this remote, mountainous region of France, known as the Jura Massif region. Over time, cheese production became a community-based activity in the Jura; groups of dairy farmers would pool their daily milk output at the local cooperative cheese dairy, or *fruitière*, in order to make huge rounds of cheese that could be kept over the long winters. This method of organization is still employed in the production of Comté cheese today. Comté is a cooked and pressed cheese made with unpasteurized milk from the Montbéliarde cow, a local breed. Today, 3,200 dairy farmers are organized into 169 cheese producing factories. *Fruitières*, or cooperative cheese factories, which are entirely farmer-owned and managed, account for 86% of Comté cheese production (Colinet et al. 2006). After receiving the milk from the dairy farmers, the *fruitières* make large rounds of Comté known as *meules*, which weigh approximately 35 kg (77 pounds). The cheese is then aged for a minimum of four months by one of 20 *affineurs*, or cheese ripeners.

In 1958, Comté cheese was awarded AOC status. In 1963, the Inter-professional Committee for Gruyère from Comté (CIGC, according to its French acronym) was formed, to regulate the Comté label and to codify the rules of production. The CIGC is responsible for setting the standards for the production of Comté cheese², which are then approved by the INAO; establishing a maximum production

² As of January 1, 2007, each collective organization (e.g., the CIGC) must select an independent certifying organization to ensure that production (at all levels) complies with the standards established by the collective organization.

volume each year; and engaging in collective advertising campaigns. By law, Comté cheese cannot be produced outside of the Jura Massif region in eastern France. The region is comprised the entire department of Jura and parts of the departments of Doubs and Ain. Many of the *fruitières* are located in the steep mountainous areas of the “Haut Doubs” and “Haut Jura,” areas known for harsh winters that make it impossible to grow most crops. However, these areas are also recognized for the biodiversity of the permanent pastures that characterize these areas and contribute to the diversity of Comté cheese.

The boundaries linking production of Comté cheese to the Jura Massif region are only one way in which the link between the final product and the terroir of the region is preserved. The actors in the Comté supply chain believe strongly that the specific microclimate, soil properties, and native grass species around each *fruitière* contribute to the specific taste characteristics of the cheese that is produced in that *fruitière*. The taste, flavor, and texture of each Comté varies according to the environmental conditions in which it is produced, the season of production, the techniques and know-how of the cheesemaker, and the aging process (Gerz and Dupont 2006).

In the Comté AOC, there is a dynamic between the specific tastes and flavors of the cheese, and the producers’ collective practices. The diversity of Comté cheese would not be possible without the maintenance of the many small *fruitières* that are scattered throughout the region. The CIGC is responsible for the creation and ongoing modification of the “decrees” that regulate production; moreover, the CIGC has used the production specifications to reduce concentration (of the *fruitières* and the farms)³, to maintain the quality of the cheese, and to preserve the traditional production methods. One of the highest-level members of the INAO at the national level cited the Comté decree as being one of the “most complete, rigorous, and serious” of all of the AOCs in France.

³ In order to preserve the *fruitières* and prevent concentration, in 1998, the CIGC established a rule that all milk be collected from within a radius of no more than 25 km. By limiting the size of the area from which each *fruitière* collects its milk, the particular climatic and environmental characteristics of each micro-region are translated into the specificity of the cheese produced by each *fruitière*.

With the decrees, the CIGC has worked hard to anticipate and direct the course of evolutions in the marketing and production practices for Comté cheese, and it is largely due to the decree that the Comté supply chain has been able to preserve the traditional cooperative structure of the *fruitières* and the artisanal production methods. The strength and organization of the CIGC are important factors that have contributed to the success of the Comté AOC. The actors in the Comté supply chain, although acknowledging competing interests, are unified in their commitment to common goals, including the expansion of sales, maintenance of product quality, and preservation of artisanal methods. All decisions within the CIGC are made only after *unanimous* agreement between all three groups. The success of the Comté AOC is due largely to a strong organizational infrastructure responsible for coordinating research and marketing efforts, as well as to committed leaders at every step along the supply chain, from the milk producers, to the *fruitières*, to the *affineurs*.

However, the political-economic and cultural contexts in France have also been fundamental to success of the Comté AOC. France was the first country in the world to establish a national system for protection of AOC products. In addition these types of labels have been, since the early 1990s, a key part of the European Union's agricultural platform. French AOC labels must be approved both by the INAO and by the Directorate General for Agriculture of the European Union. These institutions help guarantee that quality labels do not promote unfair competition, and also that they are designed in ways that maintain the quality of agricultural products, integrate all of the actors involved in the production of the product, and contribute to the protection of local environmental resources. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the Comté producers are able to draw from a wider French culture that values notions of cooperation and collective identity, as well as an understanding and valorization of *terroir* and quality. At the same time, given that Comté cheese is sold in the global marketplace, wider French and European institutional support is needed, in order to give the Comté producers the necessary tools to develop and protect their AOC label. The AOC umbrella in France is, in other words, a necessary, but not sufficient, condition; it provides *possibilities* for place-based

foods, but does not guarantee long-term success. Success, instead, resides more in the hands of local actors and the vagaries of global markets.

The importance of *terroir*

In France, the AOC label creates a concrete connection between food, drink and certain geographies. This connection is both articulated and legitimated in the notion of *terroir*, thus *terroir* really serves as the foundation for the entire model. Since its founding, the main function of the INAO, the administrative body overseeing the label, enumerated in the official literature, has been to protect the link between the *terroir* of a place and the quality or specific taste characteristics of a particular product. *Terroir*, a powerful cultural concept that cannot be easily translated into English, is a product of both culture and environment. *Terroir* is understood as the interacting natural and human factors in a particular place, which contribute to the specificity and the unique tastes of a product. In one study of INAO agents, who oversee the entire process of obtaining and maintaining AOC status, the concept of *terroir* was selected as the most important concept used in their everyday work (Barham 2003).

In terms of proving and promoting the connection to *terroir*, French producers have an advantage over countries with newer and more heterogeneous food cultures. In France, producers in a region may have produced a certain product, according to the same production practices and adapted to the environmental characteristics of the region, for several centuries. Thus the AOC wines, cheeses, and other food products in France are truly "*produits de terroir*" and embedded in the long-standing traditions, culture, and environmental particularities of a region. With the AOC designation, this link to the landscape, originally born of necessity—as local actors adapted production practices to social, cultural, or environmental constraints—ultimately became codified, a "naturalized reality."

A recent initiative in the Comté region provides an example of how the connection between *terroir* and quality is understood and enacted in practice. In order to confirm the connection between the taste of Comté cheese and the *terroir* of the Jura Massif region, the CIGC started the "*Terroir Program*" in the early

1990s. With this program, individual *fruitières* volunteer to take place in a characterization of their “milk basin,” which includes a soil map, assessment of climatic conditions, and inventory of all of the plant species found in the prairies of the milk basin. The second step is a tasting of the cheeses produced by the *fruitière* by the “*Jury de Terroir*,” a team of trained volunteers who taste and characterize the cheese according to its different flavors. For instance, the cheeses produced by one *fruitière* were recently describing as “recalling notes of melted butter, white chocolate, and cream; nuts and honey; grilled onion; black chocolate; and plums.” The final outcome of this process is a poster (describing the environmental and botanical characteristics of the milk basin, as well as the tastes and flavors in the cheese) that each *fruitière* can display to customers. In addition, Florence Béro-dier, a trained food scientist who is in charge of the program, has produced scientific articles demonstrating the sensory differences between cheeses made in different micro-regions of the Comté AOC region, and has developed an aroma wheel describing the characteristic flavors of all Comté cheeses.

The complex uses of the concept of *terroir* in the formulation, organization and implementation of the AOC label are crucial to any understanding of the success of French place-based foods. Champagne, Roquefort cheese, and cured Bayonne ham are all products that come from a specific cultural context but travel around the globe. The relationship each one has to *terroir* helps assure a constant interaction between local and extralocal domains.

The United States: cultural possibilities and political barriers

Is it possible to create a similar system that works to preserve (and re-discover and generate) locally-based foods and drinks here in the United States? Can the concept of *terroir* be translated and adapted by American producers? Do we have the cultural and political capital required in order to create similar conditions such as those found in the Comté region of France? Our conclusion is that it is possible to create this type of system, if the impetus to “localize production” in the United States stems from the desires of both consumers and producers for change in the present food system.

Clearly, in the United States right now, local food is “good to think,” and such thinking is changing consumer practices. A variety of different initiatives—some originating with local and state governmental agencies, some with activist groups, and some with rural communities—have developed over the past twenty five years. Most significantly, there has been a great resurgence in farmers’ markets all over the country. A traditional means of getting food from farm to table, by the 1970s farmers’ markets had undergone a precipitous decline, with less than one hundred still in operation. Today there are 4,385 farmers’ markets in the United States (USDA 2007). A second model for bringing Americans closer to farms is Community Supported Agriculture, in which individuals, families and even institutions become, “in essence, shareholders of the farm” (Lyson 2004). CSA participants generally invest in the farm in advance for the entire growing season, and in return they receive a weekly box of goods from the farm (fruits and vegetables, and sometimes flowers, eggs, poultry, or cheese). Restaurants have become a third avenue for promoting local foods; when chefs work directly with a farmer they can have a greater say in the quality and specific properties of the food than when buying from a larger food distributor. Finally, in 2005, a group of self-called “concerned culinary adventurers” in San Francisco decided to eat locally for one month, and named their group the “locavores.” This initial seed has bloomed into nation-wide effort called the “localvore movement,” in which groups of citizens pledge to eat within a 150 mile radius of their community for a day, a week, or a month.

Scholars looking at these local foods movements initiatives have identified three strategic orientations for those involved in changing the contemporary food system in the United States: “warrior, builder and weaver work” (Stevenson et al. 2007). They argue that warrior work is primarily political (based on resistance), builder work is primarily economic (based on mobilization), and weaver work is in both domains with a primary focus on civil society (based on connection) (Ibid.). Values-based labeling initiatives, and especially the AOC model, can be conceptualized as builder work, especially when such work is defined to include “reconstruct[ing] economic sector to include such goals as sustainability...and regionality; works within established political structures to create

alternative public policies (ibid, pp. 43–44).” Furthermore, we argue that the AOC model, by emphasizing collective management and a demonstrable link to environmental and cultural resources, most strongly exemplifies a type of builder work that is capable of long-term success, since this model links a *set of practices* across the entire food system.

Work to build an AOC type model for food and drink in the United States has begun. In several regions of the United States researchers, producers and government officials have begun to investigate the possibilities of a place-based food labeling system. Federal legislation was established to define geographical boundaries, known as American Viticultural Areas, for wine production. (This legislation, overseen by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, does not, however, require a cooperative system of governance or the specification of culturally-sensitive or environmentally-sustainable production methods). In 2007, “Napa Valley wine” became the first American place-based product to be granted protection directly through the European Union system. Another example comes from Florida, where some orange juice producers have begun to lobby for a label that would designate juice made from 100% Florida oranges. Since the dominant producers’ association rejected this proposal, some companies have initiated their own “100% Florida” marketing campaigns. In northern Arizona, ethnobotanist Gary Paul Nabhan and colleagues have identified place-based foods as an important part of that region’s agricultural future, seeing foreign and domestic tourism and renewed regional heritage among residents of the state as possible markets (Nabhan et al. 2005). In Missouri, under the Missouri Regional Cuisines Project, a team of researchers, producers, retailers, and agritourism venues are working together to market Missouri wine and food products using labels of origin from distinct agroecological regions.

In the United States, our agrarian and culinary histories are very different from those of France, which presents unique challenges as producers and consumers try to “translate *terroir*” in a way that could positively impact product quality, farmer livelihoods, and environmental resources. However, the flattening qualities of our globalized agrifood system that helped precipitate the “buy-local” movement may also provide the opportunity for a transnational network of locally-based foods. At the

same time, because the United States context is so different, there may be a need for more fluidity in the relationships between food, drink and geography. For example, how are “traditional” or “typical” foods identified in nations with very different histories than that of France? What about the traditional foods and drinks brought by the many immigrants to the United States, past and present? How could a US-based model for place-based products also acknowledge the American emphasis on innovation and change? How could such a model incorporate the lost and/or waning traditions of Native Americans and African Americans?

One example of the American case in which producers and researchers are specifically trying to address this issue of *terroir* comes from Vermont, where an interdisciplinary team of researchers is working with the state’s Agency of Agriculture to provide a documented link to *terroir* for the state’s signature place-based food—maple syrup. Since the team includes an anthropologist, a sugarmaker, a sensory scientist, a chemist and a geologist, the research involves demonstrating that the taste of Vermont maple syrup involves traditional practices as well as environmental conditions. In the course of such research, it became clear that many of the almost 2,000 sugarmakers in the state could identify variation in the taste of maple syrup due to production methods, sugarbush location and seasonal changes (as well as consumers in objective taste tests). They have not, however, traditionally communicated such flavor variations to consumers, for example, by creating a sensory wheel that provides explanations of such variation. This is the next for the maple syrup project. Communicating the relation between taste and place is one of the key challenges when working in a United States context, where consumers are not familiar with the idea of *terroir* and are not as accustomed to seeking and paying for quality.

Perhaps the most essential question is whether a model for agricultural practice that is so rooted in the particular cultural values of France can really be transplanted to another country. In 1996, the Quebec provincial government passed a law creating a system of certification for AOC and organic products from the province. The law was directly modeled after the French system, but has since been modified to reflect North American cultural values and market-based practices. Creating geographical boundaries for

certain agricultural products is fairly straightforward. The more challenging aspects of translating French law into Canadian practices relate to operationalizing assumptions about collective practices and the link to terroir.

Finally, questions of agricultural and trade policy must also be addressed. If producer and consumer demand for place-based and local food systems are not supported by the state, as is the case in France with the successful AOC system, it is going to be difficult for Muscatine melons, Vermont maple syrup, and Florida oranges to create a place-based identity. The increasing consumer rejection of anonymous commodities in the United States is beginning to have an impact higher and higher in the policy food chain, but not without some conflict. In recent years, conflicts taking place in the WTO over the definition and regulation of GIs have pitted the United States and other advocates of the right to an unencumbered market against the European Union and its supporters, who have argued that the degree of protection should be increased and that not doing so constitutes unfair trading practices. On the other hand, as agricultural economist Tim Josling puts it, “the task for farm policy in the future, both in the European Union and the United States, will be to reinvent the institutions that have supported agriculture through its ‘commodity’ phase and bring them into relevance for the needs of a ‘consumer product’ orientation” (Josling 2006, pp. 360).

Despite the many challenges involved in importing a model for practice from across the Atlantic, the timing may be just right. Fundamental assumptions embedded in the French AOC system offer a starting point for the creation of a system that could protect place-based foods and drinks in the United States ultimately able to connect the environmental, cultural, and social aspects of food production, creating linkages across the entire food system.

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