Connecting Regional Identity and Regional Products: ‘Fakelore’ or Contribution to a Sustainable Society?
The Case of North Brabant (The Netherlands)

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Regional Products in the Global Arena: Connecting People with the Origin of Food
North Brabant: a ‘strong’ region

- 5,000 kms² (14.5% of Dutch surface)
- 2.4 million inhabitants (15% of Dutch population)
- 57% (nominally) Roman Catholic; 6% Protestant; 5% Muslim
North Brabant: a ‘strong’ region

- 140,000 companies and 1.1 million jobs: 25% of Dutch industrial employment
- 20% of Dutch industrial production
- Produces 15% of Dutch BNP; is the Netherlands’ second economic motor
- Brainport Eindhoven: knowledge-intensive industry
- High levels of education
North Brabant 1900-2009

A history of rapid economic development and cultural change

- Declining number of people working in agricultural sector (from 25 to 3.7 % of labour force)
- Economic transformation from labour-intensive to knowledge-intensive industries
- Cultural and social emancipation of Catholics
- From economically and culturally backward to second economic motor and culturally thriving
Romanticizing the Arcadian past...

- Industrialization and secularization led to loss of sense of belonging
- 1930s-1950s: fear of losing cultural identity
- Response: regionalist movement propagating more or less true images of the past and invented traditions: ‘Brabantia Nostra’
- Resulting in a strong regional identity
But what happened to food culture?

- Romanticizing an imagined agrarian and rural past
- Idealizing traditions and customs regarding food
- ‘Burgundian amiability’
- Forgetting the harsh reality of the past
- ‘Fakelore’ replaces folklore

The Brabant sausage roll and coffee lunch
But what happened to food culture?

- ‘Fakelore’ replaces folklore, also in products
- ‘Fairytales’ to market products
- Resulting in a loss of sense of authenticity, connectedness, and quality
- Lessening instead of strengthening regional identity: not sustainable

‘a quality cheese prepared according to old-fashioned traditions’… in a German cheese factory

‘a traditional winter pastry bread from the time of the guilds’… invented by a smart baker in the 1930s

‘bottled according to Brabant custom’… invented in 1973
Connecting to a real past with even better stories!

Starting points:

- A history shared with parts of Belgium (former Duchy of Brabant)
- A history of simplicity and poverty, idealized in Vincent van Gogh’s ‘The Potato Eaters’ (1885)
- Until 1950, most people involved in growing and preparing their own food
- Vast reservoir of collective memory, recipes, stories
Exploring Brabant’s food culture

- Plea for using oral history (interviews) to document regional customs regarding production, preparation, and consumption of food and drink (= regional food culture)
- Closely linked to religious and cultural traditions
- Easy to tap into as people’s memories are just beneath the surface
- Everyone has memories concerning eating and drinking!
- Objects, menus, and photos are obvious aids
Pilot project sponsored by Interreg

- Goals: gathering stories and recipes to document past food culture (1940s-1960s)
- Using these as sources of inspiration for events, exhibitions, workshops, cooking classes, et cetera
- Creating new consciousness, appropriation, and innovation of regional food culture
Deliverables

- Cookery books with new recipes, brochures, tourist routes, dinner and hotel arrangements, et cetera
- Websites with stories and background information
- Set of basic values identifying old and new Brabant food culture
- Exhibitions and meetings huge success (over 10,000 people)
Evaluation and expectations

- Catering industry craving for input and ideas
- Low-key ‘folklore’ or popular culture provides easy entry to general audience
- Regional food culture links tangible with intangible heritage: objects and food with stories and experiences
- Easy link with tourism, art, and heritage institutions (experience economy; tourist packages)
- Regional television and Internet offer free dissemination
- Large educational possibilities
But

- Information has to be ready-made (packages)
- Little commercial attitude among heritage partners
- Little heritage-mindedness among commercial partners
- Risk of approaching the same consumer public all the time (middle-class, well-to-do, middle-aged, with an interest in regional identity, et cetera)
- No institute to coordinate acquisition and transmission of knowledge to producers, caterers, and consumers, as in other regions
So the question remains…

The regional products chain

producers; logistics; retail

Goal: sustainable production and sales

Means: enrootedness in the region; producer cooperations

Sustainable regional products

Region/identity/culture

Goal: enhancing identity

What are the means here??

Inhabitants/consumers

Goal: raising consciousness and enabling appropriation

Means: marketing; branding; market concepts
In conclusion…

• Although North Brabant is a region with a strong economy and a strong identity.
• Its regional food culture is based on either romantic ‘fakelore’ or commercial ‘fairytales’: not sustainable.
• Nevertheless, a potentially rich reservoir of veracious regional food culture is ready available.
• Through fieldwork and oral history knowledge (stories, experiences, recipes…) can be gathered.
• And used for product innovation, tourism, education, and cultural renewal through appropriation.
• As major ingredients for sustainability, to the benefit of people, planet, and profit.
Thank you for your attention