



AN INTERNATIONAL
KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE
INITIATIVE ABOUT FOOD
& FOOD SYSTEMS

/ Australia /

Melbourne

The Perpetual Heterogeneity of Gastronomy

At its core, gastronomy seems indelibly linked to heterogeneity, diversity, and plurality. Given its etymological derivation, *the rules of the stomach*, this makes sense, since there is no definitive universal stomach, and so there must be no singular set of rules for all of the stomachs out there in the world. From a more pragmatic perspective, it also makes sense: How could we create a single, unifying framework around gastronomy, if the foodways, systems, and cultures of our planet are also characterized by diversity and difference? And why would we try?

Indeed, the ways in which the word gastronomy (and its derivatives) have been deployed since 1801 are marked by variation, from commercial to communal, populist to *recherché*, exotic to familiar. Gastronomy thrives—and evolves—in a delightful, frustrating, and self-determining impermanence.

The year 2016 was, for me, a year of voyaging within other peoples' and places' gastronomies. I was in 13 different countries for the Eco-Gastronomy Project, the research and knowledge-exchange initiative I direct for the University of Gastronomic Sciences. Notably, this period was punctuated by three—count 'em, *three*—symposia about gastronomy. Number one was the inaugural Scotland's Foodscape, which I co-organized with Charlotte Maberly and the team from Queen Margaret University's master program in gastronomy. Number two was the third edition of the Dublin Gastronomy Symposium, hosted by the Dublin Institute of Technology and chaired by the indefatigable Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire. And, of course, number three was the William-Angliss-and-Melbourne-Uni spectacular, the 21st Symposium of Australian Gastronomy.

In reflecting on these three very similar and quite different events, I am struck by the realization that each foregrounded and thereby valorized the aspects of food related to making, materiality, and mental-manual practice. Food studies conferences are often characterized by a lack of attention to eating, jollity, the senses, and that wholly central issue, the affective relations between food and those who *do* and *do with* it. What emerges from a return to this attention is an awareness that the ways in which food performs are always different, depending on context and community. I taste differently than you do (in two senses, actually); I make differently than you do; we feel differently than they do; our food is us, and we are our food, but despite the fluidity of it all, boundaries seem to exist. How can any of this reduce to a single system—or even a single set of practices, definitions, understandings, or (dare I type it) *knowledges*?

As alluded to in my plenary talk on scriptedness (alongside Josh Evans' exploration of improvisation), one way to think about gastronomy and its heterogeneous plurality is through the concept of the "boundary object." (Indeed, food and food systems more generally can also be perceived in this way.)

A boundary object is, paradoxically, an *unbounded* space of interaction. It is one that is always perceived differently by those who interact with it, and one that also always morphs and re-presents itself

for interaction *because of the ways in which we interact with it*. It nonetheless has certain qualities that seem to persist over time, and many people can often agree on many of its characteristics. At the same time, however, we often disagree about other characteristics—because of our own experiences with it, and because it is forever changing as those experiences unfold. Love, society, humor, democracy—each of these might be thought of as boundary objects, always different yet somehow also nameable and meaningful. More tangible things, such as maps, farms, archeological artifacts, and designed tools can also be boundary objects, coming to be used differently (and acquiring different interpretations) because of the communities that interact with them.

The coinage of the term is attributed to sociologist Susan Leigh Star and philosopher James R. Griesemer, who describe boundary objects as “objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (1989, p. 393). In later years, Star went on to clarify certain aspects of boundary objects that she felt had been blurred over time by the many scholars who eagerly picked up on the notion: “Boundary objects are a sort of arrangement that allow different groups to work together without consensus. However, the forms this may take are not arbitrary” (2010, p. 602).¹

One of these non-arbitrary forms, particularly relevant to food, is that boundary objects are often worked on and with by communities of practice that may be considered ‘non-expert’ or ‘untrained’ by the other communities of practice working on and with the same object. This leads to the requirement that boundary objects absorb a diversity of interpretations, uses, and users—across all scales of knowledge and experience. For gastronomy, it means incorporating multiple interpretations and interactions that often differ and disagree: those of ‘professional’ cooks, ‘naïve’ consumers, ‘expert’ food scholars, ‘manipulative’ corporations, ‘scientific’ authorities, ‘loving’ grandparents, and ‘average’ eaters alike.

During the Australian symposium, I witnessed a glorious assemblage of agreements, disagreements, makings, doings, thinkings, and sensings. *This content is too academic*, some people said. *The theme is too history-driven*. Some seemed to think the symposium was too producer-focused, while others felt there wasn’t enough attention paid to farmers’ realities. *It was gastronomy lite*. *It was too complex*. *It diverged from the old ways* (but it was also too conservative). It was all about the individual, except for all that time we spent on multi-species theory. There was too much performance, not enough booze (*really?*), the rooms were both too cold and too hot, and the participants were at once elitist and too grounded. What about that manifesto focused on a gastronomic commons? And the desire *not* to debate it? And all those awful tasting moments—ugh. Plus: not enough talk about food security!

Yes, I may be dramatizing some of the wording a little, but the sentiments were ones that I witnessed. Individually (and also strung together in the paragraph above), one might think they suggest imperfection and discord. Yet to me, they say the opposite—they express exactly what I believe gastronomy should be, as a concept and as a practice. To me, they typify the very nature of gastronomy: the diversity, disagreements, and multiple realities of food, and a pluralism that cannot and should not be resolved into clarity or definition. They reinforce that gastronomy is a boundary object, around which we (those of us both present and not at all these symposia, conferences, events, meals, harvests, sit-ins, shopping trips, interventions, and digestions) converge and diverge, and perpetually reformulate and reimagine what it *is*.

For some, this may not be a very satisfying way to interpret things. Humans of all stripes (myself very much included) like to frame and clarify and stabilize meaning. It helps us get through our days and produce value for ourselves and those we care about. Definition allows us to agree on terms of reference

¹ Star goes on to clarify three further aspects of the boundary object that she felt had been elided over time:

- The object (remember, to read this as a set of work arrangements that are at once material and processual) resides between social worlds (or communities of practice) where it is ill structured.
- When necessary, the object is worked on by local groups who maintain its vaguer identity as a common object, while making it more specific, more tailored to local use within a social world, and therefore useful for work that is NOT interdisciplinary.
- Groups that are cooperating without consensus tack back-and-forth between both forms of the object.

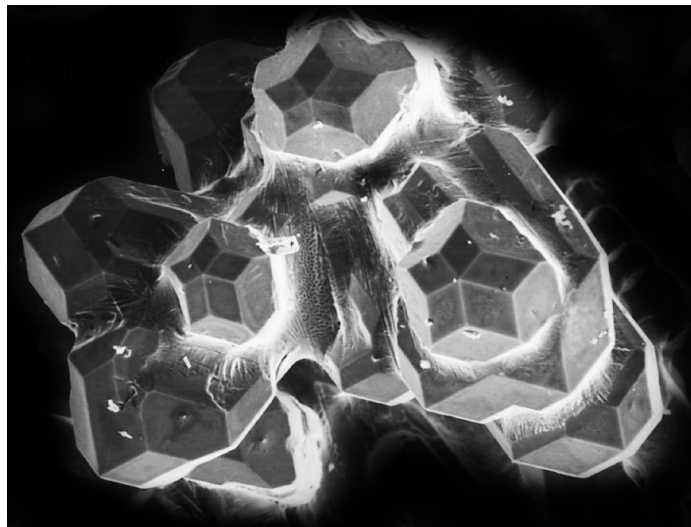
(2010, p. 604–5)

and move toward pre-determined objectives. Yet over time, it has become apparent that frameworks and definitions and objectives very often get mobilized towards giving a few people power while exploiting the labor, bodies, and resources of others. And if there is anything that the spirits of three gastronomy symposia have demonstrated to me, it is that food, food studies, and food systems are best when power keeps moving around, from person to person, place to place, and moment to moment. This is also a more realistic way of perceiving how things happen in the world—just look around at the systems where we humans wield less influence.

The opening paragraph of this brief text starts with the words “at its core,” a turn of phrase that may now seem a bit contradictory to the sense of what follows. (It seems a bit contradictory to me, anyway.) Can gastronomy-as-a-boundary-object have a *core*? And if so, can there be agreement on what constitutes that core? Star and Griesemer (and later Star and other colleagues) laid out some pretty clear characteristics about their notion, elements that need to be present in order to name a thing a boundary object. But what if boundary objects are themselves boundary objects? In that case, then disagreement, vagueness, and ill-structuring might be at their core as well (or perhaps elsewhere else within their undefined boundaries....) This then raises the same query for gastronomy: What is at its core, if anything? (Nougat, I would like to think.)

That conundrum, I suspect, may need to be debated at future foodish symposia. Or maybe it's just boundary objects, all the way down.

D. Szanto
Jan. 2, 2017
Montreal, QC



This *really* is not a boundary object. It's a "quasicrystal" of a metal alloy, showing icosahedral symmetry. But it's what I think of when I think about boundary objects.

(From The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia®. S.v. "[Quasicrystalline geometry](#).")

References

- Star, Susan Leigh. 2010. "This Is Not a Boundary Object: Reflections on the Origin of a Concept." *Science, Technology & Human Values* 35 (5): 601–17.
- Star, Susan Leigh, and James R. Griesemer. 1989. "Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39." *Social Studies of Science* 19 (3): 387–420.



University of Gastronomic Sciences
Università degli Studi
di Scienze Gastronomiche



Slow Food®