

# Cosmopolitans of Regionalism: dealers of omnivorous taste under Italian food truck economic imaginary

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## ABSTRACT

Cultural omnivorousness has gained relevance as a suitable theory to explain contemporary patterns of consumption, but the actual dealing of omnivorous taste by economic actors and businesses has been mostly overlooked. Through ethnographic research, this article explores how Italian gourmet food truck operators concretely produce claims of authenticity for omnivorous seekers. First, the adoption of the perspective of food truck operators highlights the reflexive and market-bounded nature of the omnivorous taste reproduction. Moreover, ‘being authentic’ becomes an imperative for tastemakers, imposed by the economic imaginary. Finally, the centrality of regionalism in the Italian production of authenticity suggests that localism, too, has been subsumed by global food imaginaries and that regionalism expresses a cosmopolitan attitude. Taken together, these findings allow the integration of existing theory of food cultural omnivorousness: ‘gourmet’ food must be authentic to be recognised by omnivores and distinctive to be successful on markets.

## KEYWORDS

authenticity; cultural omnivorousness; economic imaginary; food; taste; taste dealers

## 1. Introduction

It is an ordinary evening with friends outside the usual pub in my city when I see a food truck stopping on the other side of the road. I quickly convince my friends to go and have a look. Behind the counter there are two men in their sixties, looking as dirty as their truck and speaking broken Italian with heavy regional accent. We order a classical sandwich with horseshoe-shaped salami [a typical popular street food from Lombardy] while we continue to talk, giving them advice about the best days for parking their truck by the pub. They decide to thank us by offering some bad looking, greasy, deep-fried pork rinds: I volunteer to eat the serving. Then I notice a piece of cardboard on the right corner of the truck attached with scotch tape saying ‘The real Arccia porchetta [Ariccia is an Italian town renowned for porchetta]’. The sandwiches are delicious. We thank them and leave.

(Ethnographic notes)

The protagonists of this short experience are a good example of the Italian traditional ‘scuzzy’, a street food vendor characterised by low-quality but abundant servings

prepared in precarious hygienic conditions. Being the Italian equivalent of American ‘roach coaches’, people usually refer to them using the word ‘scuzzy’ in their own regional dialect (‘*zozzone*’, ‘*svunch*’, ‘*caddozzone*’, ‘*zuzzuso*’, etc.). The striking feature about this episode was that, albeit far from the gourmet food truck model, these men were striving to label their food as ‘authentic’. Their popular wisdom and intuition were enough to make them understand that a trend was ongoing, and to label their product as the ‘real’ *porchetta* from Ariccia was an important attractive factor. In other words, although the accuracy of the label was undermined by its appearance (Ariccia was wrongly spelled and written on cardboard) and the taste (the greasy fried pork rinds being outside the canons of ‘gourmet food’) they were influenced by and tried to incorporate an ‘economic imaginary’ (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008) of gourmet food trucks, and a related ‘culinary imaginary’.

Food trucks are an economic trend that is spreading quickly in the United States and worldwide. The US Chamber of Commerce Foundation states that the revenues of the sector grew from ‘relative nonexistence in 2008’ to \$650 million of revenues in 2014 and \$2.6 billion of revenues in 2017 (Hendrix and Bodwish 2018). The rise of a ‘gourmet food truck’ scene relying on authenticity (Irvin 2017) can be related to the rise of cultural omnivorous predisposition also in food consumption (Emontspool and Georgi 2017; Johnston and Baumann 2015, 2007; Warde, Martens, and Olsen 1999), close to the corresponding consumption trends in music (Peterson 2013), literature (Purhonen, Gronow, and Rahkonen 2010), art (López-Sintas and Katz-Gerro 2005), television (Lizardo and Skiles 2009) and consumption in digital spheres (Airoldi, Beraldo, and Gandini 2016).

Italy, a country with a rooted and recognised food culture (Heltosky 2004), is no exception regarding the shift towards a culturally omnivore appetite, or towards the diffusion of a ‘gourmet food truck’ economic imaginary: according to a report by the Italian Union of the Chambers of Commerce, the number of mobile street food businesses has grown from 1717 to 2729 between 2013 and 2018, with a growth rate of 58,9% (Unioncamere and InfoCamere 2018). Remarkably, companies owned by foreigners represent just a small minority (12%). This trend, together with a similar growth of ‘food gourmet festivals’, confirms the relevance of Italy as a case study to explore contemporary production of taste in the age of cultural omnivorousness: the great variety of the Italian food culture and a marginal presence of ethnic and foreign food cultures, as well as the prominent role of regional and typical products, made it possible for the imaginary of ‘gourmet food truck’ to build on historic Italian peculiarities, generating specific outcomes.

In fact, although omnivorous patterns of consumption in Italy are still an almost unexplored academic topic with rare exceptions (Zanchini 2012), the Italian culinary landscape seems to fit well in the cultural omnivorousness theory, showing interesting variations. While exoticism has been observed as a symbolic marker of omnivorous taste (Johnston and Baumann 2007), in the Italian culinary landscape its influence is limited by a reluctance to accept foreign food (compared to other countries) and its role is taken up by other concepts, such as typicality. In this context, a variety of recipes and ingredients belonging to local traditions and which had been disregarded during the second half of the twentieth century take the place of exotic food, resulting in the production of a regionally-oriented authenticity.

This article, thus, aims to contribute both empirically and theoretically to the studies on food tasting production and consumption through ethnography of the Italian gourmet food truck scene, composed of interviews with micro-entrepreneurs and participant observation of street-food festivals organised by food trucks. First, we will

concentrate on food truck operators as dealers of taste, contributing to the understanding of what their self-perceived boundaries of the gourmet food trucks scene are, and to the analysis of the processes through which authenticity is concretely claimed and labelled as gourmet through taste. Second, we will address the challenging task of ‘making a sense of taste’ (Korsmeyer 2002) in its literal meaning, assessing the role of taste and other senses in the production of a proper ‘promise of taste’, performed by food truck operators through an array of tactics to sell their food during festivals.

These findings lead to a number of empirical and theoretical contributions. The double identity of food truck operators as both economic and cultural actors enables to assert the reflexive and market-bounded nature of omnivorous taste production, and to lay the foundations of a ‘cultural political economy’ of omnivorous taste production. The analysis of the economic imaginary in its dimension of normative system makes it possible to interpret authenticity also as an imperative, to ‘be authentic’, similarly to the ‘be creative’ (McRobbie 2014) imperative existing in the broader creative economy. Finally, we call to integrate and strengthen food consumption theories under the cultural omnivorousness paradigm: we contend that the food truck economic imaginary under the Italian taste regime (Arsel and Bean 2013) shows a marginalisation of exotic and foreign food but a great relevance of regionalism, without a backward modification of the cosmopolitan attitude of the actors involved. From this evidence we advance a contribution on the labels through which food becomes ‘gourmet’ and pleasing.

## **2. Context and literature review**

### **2.1. *Cultural omnivorous food consumption and cosmopolitan attitude***

The core concept of cultural omnivorousness theory is that in contemporary consumption the high- and middle-class preferences shifted from a highbrow taste for a unique elitist category to an omnivorous appetite for a plurality of tastes, through the appropriation of precedent lowbrow (sub-)cultures (Peterson and Kern 1996). Further evidence suggested that the cultural omnivorous attitude of people should not be valued on the quantitative breadth of their tastes, but on a combination of their taste schemes, or discourses (van Eijck and Lievens 2008). Cultural omnivorousness has been inspected in most different spheres, suggesting its validity as general model to explain contemporary consumption, although significantly Rossman and Peterson (2015) replication of Peterson’s seminal research ten years later found that the omnivorous attitude of consumers decreased rather than increased. Besides, Katz-Gerro (2002) comparison of different consumers in different national contexts showed great variances in the labels used: these two empirical contributions call for the assessment of its fluid and iridescent nature, looking for the evolution of the phenomenon to integrate the theory. Moreover, a study from Warde, Wright, and Gayo-Cal (2007) questioned the self-consciousness and commitment of cultural omnivores with empirical evidence of more bland schemes of adherence to the model.

Cultural omnivorousness is not the end of the distinction processes through cultural tastes (Bourdieu 2013): it is, instead, a cultural disposition (Lizardo and Skiles 2012) at which the continuation of the same aspiration is aimed, modified to adapt to another cultural and economic context. The omnivorous taste in food consumption has been contended firstly by Warde, Martens, and Olsen (1999) through an exploration of the variety of restaurant cuisines searched by patrons in England. Since then, little

attention has been dedicated to this consumption realm with regards to taste and the omnivorous attitude, following a general disinterest in sociological studies for the topic of food consumption (Warde and Martens 2000).

Further attention to the topic has been devoted by Johnston and Baumann (2007), who sought to expose how the new food cultural consumption is characterised by tensions between democracy and distinction, and to analyse authenticity and exoticism as the two frames through which American gourmet food is legitimised, basing on discourse and content analysis on gourmet food media. Authenticity is described as the product of a continuous interaction between tradition and originality that can be broken down into an array of dimensions: Geographic Specificity, Simplicity, Personal Connection, History and Tradition, and Ethnic Connection (Johnston and Baumann 2015). Exoticism is more generally defined as a frame based on the ‘culinary other’, relying on unusualness and foreignness (Johnston and Baumann 2007). For the authors, the two frames represent significantly different, distinctive qualities [...] often in ways that are mutually exclusive’ (Johnston and Baumann 2015, p.87). A similar trend toward an omnivorousness taste has been observed in the consumption of alcoholic drinks such as wine (Smith Maguire 2018), beer (Land, Sutherland, and Taylor 2018) and spirits (Thurnell-Read 2019) and more generally in coffee bars (Roseberry 1996).

Cosmopolitanism in this context was first conceptualised by Johnston and Baumann (2007) as omnivorousness, while it became one of the two phenomena (the other being neo-colonialism) from which the exotic label derives in the monograph (Johnston and Baumann 2015). More recently, other research exploring New Nordic Food consumption and cosmopolitanism argued that the concept of cosmopolitan consumption has a broader validity and indicates foodies’ attitudes toward distinction (Emontspool and Georgi 2017). The strict link of cosmopolitanism and omnivorous consumption is deducible from the birth of the latter concept. Peterson himself wrote that he took into consideration cosmopolitanism as a ‘useful alternative’ way to define the phenomenon before opting for cultural omnivorousness (Peterson 2005b). A more thorough assessment of cosmopolitanism becomes then necessary for the aims of our research, especially since the success of this word led to its use in a variety of meanings (Vertovec and Cohen 2003).

First, we shall adopt Beck’s distinction between a ‘philosophical cosmopolitanism’, existing just as an intellectual speculation and ideological assertion, and ‘really existing cosmopolitanism’, that is being always embedded in the real world and is a mix between cosmopolitan and national culture (Beck 2006). In this sense, cosmopolitan and national culture are clearly conflicting but not irreconcilable: cosmopolitanism itself can be thought of as globalisation internal to the national state (Beck 2002), also observed while analysing the interrelations between cosmopolitan food culture and the American national one (Johnston, Baumann, and Cairns 2010). Cosmopolitanism can be indeed defined as a ‘third culture’ (Featherstone 1995) that enables the individual to seek cultural variety and identify himself as belonging to transnational values.

In any case, cosmopolitanism does not necessarily translate into concrete transnational life habits, and it must be conceived as an outlook (Roudometof 2005). This specification is necessary not to negate the existing connection between cosmopolitanism and middle-class and high-class status (Featherstone 2002), but to indicate that it does not concern just the narrow minority that travels globally. We can broadly identify as ‘cosmopolitans’ those people with a cosmopolitan attitude, defined as the ensemble of people’s opinions, attitudes, values and orientation (Mau, Mewes, and Zimmermann 2008), albeit under specific conditions: they still need to be members of the middle-class or lower-middle class, and adherence to cosmopolitan values is their

active choice and not a passive constraint.

Last, our empirical focus on micro-entrepreneurs selling taste through gourmet food trucks requires consideration of the economic regimes of accumulation and market structures in which the cultural omnivorous taste is produced. DiMaggio (1977), reviewing his contemporary studies on mass culture and mass society, suggested that these mostly underestimated the fact that cultural items were produced by economic actors in specific markets, and therefore core characteristics of mass culture could (and should) have been analysed as attributes of industries as well as of societies. This is valid also for contemporary studies on cultural omnivorousness. Mass culture and mass consumption were the complementary counterparts of Fordism, which promoted the consumption of standardised, mass-produced commodities (Jessop 1992). However, since the eighties a ‘New Spirit of Capitalism’ has emerged and tactically incorporated the criticism of massification, standardisation and commodification of society, while promoting individual autonomy, singularity, and authenticity (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005) through consumption.

To define this regime of accumulation in the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ is beyond the intentions and possibilities of this article. What is relevant here is to point out how the values promoted by this ‘post-Fordist’ capitalistic spirit well suit the omnivorous disposition for a singular and authentic (as opposed to a mass-produced and standardised) combination of plural tastes. Peterson and Kern (1996) ignored economic processes when listing the factors that contributed to the shift, and, as far as it is known by the author, no other research project has given attention to this dimension. If previous studies have been devoted to the role of the media, demonstrating their centrality in the production and circulation of omnivorous taste (Johnston and Baumann 2007), this analysis is meant instead to fill the exposed gap and address the relevance of economic actors (food truck operators) and their market (the ‘gourmet food truck’ economic imaginary) for the reproduction and dealing of cultural omnivorous taste.

Such a task also enables this article to contribute to a recent and developing literature in the broader field of consumption studies, following the Consumer Culture Theory perspective that calls for the relevance of actors other than consumers (Bean 2019; Smith Maguire and Zhang 2016). Indeed, if CCT has gained prominence as a perspective for the analysis of what ‘consumers do and believe’ (Arnould and Thompson 2018, p. 4) and consequently its literature almost exclusively concentrated on consumers as research subjects (Arnould and Thompson 2005), recently some works in this field started to engage with cases of consumers turned into producers (Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018) or more explicitly invited to ‘a shift of focus, to examine the consuming identities and passions of cultural intermediaries (market actors who would typically be considered ‘non-consumers’) alongside a greater attention to their strategic market-making work’ (Smith Maguire and Zhang 2016). Focusing on retailers as a specific case of cultural intermediary between economic imaginaries and consumers can contribute to a better understanding of the market-making of consumer cultures.

## ***2.2. The context: Italian food culture and its taste regime***

Italy is currently the EU member with the highest number of food products labelled as Protected Designation of Origin (PDO), Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) and Traditional Speciality guaranteed (TSG). Italy counts 818 such products out of 2979, followed by France (681) and Spain (327) (Ismea-Qualivita 2018). The EU grants

these certifications to specific food or wine products to designate quality based on the production in a specific local territory. Although the importance of these certifications on customers' choices has been questioned, the labels are associated with high quality, genuineness or authenticity (Grunert and Aachmann 2016). Italy is a country with a recognised food diversity and its food industry seems able to build a link between food and local territories. Therefore, it becomes essential to understand the origins of Italian food peculiarities and connect them with the developments in taste and food service economy.

Italy's culinary diversity is rooted in history. The myth of an 'Arcadian dream of domestic self-sufficiency' has been present since the Roman times (Capatti and Montanari 2003, pp.1-2) and contemporary Italian food culture is dominated by regional, local and typical dishes described in Renaissance books like *Opera* by Scappi (Capatti and Montanari 2003, pp.11-16). The first and fundamental element of Italian food culture was already established during the Renaissance: *campanilismo*, a very particular Italian phenomenon indicating a parochial, proud and vehement attachment to the unique distinctive traditions and products of a place (Parasecoli 2014). From the seventeenth century onwards taste changed, becoming closer to contemporary principles of cooking and tasting, and the Italian cuisine was dethroned by French cooks, originating a hierarchy (Ferguson 2006, 1998) that continued almost until the present day through *haute cuisine* as model for highbrow food taste (Trubek 2000), at least before the emergence of cultural omnivorosity.

A real development in contemporary food service economy in Italy only happened in the sixties and seventies, in parallel with the economic boom marking the rapid industrialisation of Italy and the formation of a middle class. The *chefs* were protagonists in this process, and they were heavily influenced by the French tradition and the *nouvelle cuisine* trend (Polacchi 2018). After the Second World War Italian consumption patterns were dominated by an industrial criterion in value regimes (Sassatelli, Santoro, and Semi 2015), that opposed traditional Italian local products: industrial products were associated with progress, development, and wealth, while traditional local products were associated with the underdeveloped past. This process, albeit common to all Western countries, has been particularly intense in Italy as it made possible to jump from a rural economy to a fully industrialised economy part of the global elite in only two decades, the fifties and the sixties, a process defined as 'the economic Italian miracle' (Ginsborg 2003; Mafai 1997). Capatti and Montanari (2003, pp.81-82) estimate from a comparative analysis of Touring Club culinary guides that between 1931 and 1969, 30% of Italian cured meats disappeared, and the trend continued in the following fifteen years.

Starting from the middle of the eighties, and more intensely from the nineties, two phenomena brought to the revaluation of Italian food diversity and regionalism. On the one hand, active movements devoted themselves to the conservation and promotion of typical local products, such as the Slow Food network (Miele and Murdoch 2002) for food and the work of Luigi Veronelli, recently converged in '*la Terra Trema*' network, for wine. On the other hand, the already developed shift to a cultural omnivorous taste in food consumption marked the crisis of the French *haute cuisine* highbrow taste predominance (Kuh 2001). The mix of *campanilismo*, food diversity and the rapid transformation of industrialisation of the food system (compared to other countries) helped Italian products to satisfy the demands for authenticity in the new age of cultural omnivorosity, marking a new period of popularity for Italian courses (Parasecoli 2014). Italy found within its territory the resources to please the new omnivorous taste regime in food consumption. Of course, the appeal of identifi-

able Italian products implied some process of ‘invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012), producing what we would describe through the words of Jesi (2014) as a ‘technicised myth’ of regionalism: the complex ensemble of local traditions has been technicised in a regional framing that would make that corpus of traditions accessible to the omnivorous taste of contemporary consumers and therefore to contemporary markets. Regionalism has been observed in food studies concerning Italy by Sassatelli and Scott (2001), who argues that Italians use an ‘embedded trust regime’ in which regional peasant tradition is so crucial that ‘it would be very difficult to understand the dynamics of trust in the Italian food market without considering regional variation. Conversely, such variation delineates the specificity of the Italian case (Sassatelli and Scott 2001, p.230).

We can therefore embed our case study in a specific Italian ‘taste regime’ literature. We make use in this regard of the notions of taste regime (Arsel and Bean 2013) and taste engineering (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017). The taste regime concept has been defined by Arsel and Bean (2013, p.900) as a ‘discursively constructed normative system that orchestrates the aesthetics of practice in a culture of consumption’. This focus on discursively constructed systems exerting power upon concrete practices, is profoundly linked to the concept of ‘economic imaginary’ that we employ in this study, defined as a semiotic system that gives meaning and shape to concrete economies (Jessop 2009). Connected to each other, taste regimes can be considered the complementary counterpart of an economic imaginary, going from the realm of economics cultures (e.g. ‘gourmet food trucks’) to consumer cultures (e.g. ‘regionally oriented omnivorousness’). An Italian taste regime can be consequently illustrated, inspired both by global trends as the rise of cultural omnivorousness and by national peculiarities as *campanilismo* and a strong reliance on regional products. Following the tripartite structure of taste regime frameworks, this regionally oriented omnivorousness instrumentalises industrial production, ritualises predilection for food characterised as regional or local, and shapes modes of engagement with food in which higher prices are accepted in exchange for quality and a more sophisticated approach to eating.

### **2.3. *The economic imaginary of gourmet food trucks in Italy and globally***

The economic trend of gourmet food trucks is quite recent and it originated in the US. The ‘Food Truck Nation’ report by the US Chambers of Commerce Foundation tells the tale in mythic terms: it all started with the birth of the progenitor, ‘Kogi Korean BBQ’, and thanks to its incredible success (two million dollars revenue reported in the first year) a new dynasty of gourmet food trucks was founded, which ‘operate[d] in Kogi’s innovative spirit’, ‘appealing to younger, cosmopolitan urbanites with novel takes on casual cuisine’ (Hendrix and Bodwish 2018, p.6). Certainly, this is also a technicised myth (Jesi 2014) rather than a historical analysis, but it is nevertheless relevant to introduce gourmet food truck as an economic imaginary that rapidly gained influence first in the US and then globally.

The concept of economic imaginary is taken from the Cultural Political Economy approach (Jessop 2009; Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008), following previous studies that applied it to the analysis of cultural intermediaries in creative economies (Jakob and van Heur 2015; O’Connor 2015). An economic imaginary ‘is a semiotic order, i.e., a specific configuration of genres, discourses and styles’ that are ‘always selectively defined - due to limited cognitive capacities and to the discursive and material biases

of specific epistemes and economic paradigms’ (Jessop and Oosterlynck 2008, p.1158). Through a co-evolutionary process of semiosis and structuration shaped by mechanisms of variation, selection and retention, economic imaginaries that managed to become highly resonant emerge and spread in the markets, highlighting the most important implication in Cultural Political Economy approach: economic imaginaries are not only descriptive labels used to address a certain trend, but also semiotic systems that give meaning to and shape the ‘real existing economies’ (Jessop 2009).

To apply the definition to our case, the success of the gourmet food truck economic niche can be explained through the capacity of a ‘gourmet food truck’ economic imaginary, which diverged from the old despised imaginary of ‘roach coaches’. Food truck operators select discourses of authenticity and distinctiveness, and are able to retain them in the market thanks to their resonance with the cultural omnivorous consumption trend and cosmopolitan attitude of contemporary consumers. The gourmet food truck imaginary is one particular outcome of these phenomena and part of a trend which sees humble businesses upscaled into cultural and creative professions, in a revaluation of artisanship (Ocejo 2017, 2014).

The interaction between food truck operators and this imaginary is complex. The imaginary would not exist if the economic actor would not act as a pioneer that understands market developments and consumer taste to open or adapt his business, doing what in classical economic terms would be labelled as ‘creative destruction’ (Schumpeter 1939). At the same time, it is only when emerging discourses manage to become resonant, and are then selected and retained, that this imaginary acquires the semiotic power to shape the economy, generating a market niche that allows a sharp increase in the number of economic actors. Furthermore, the imaginary formation process also depends on cultural taste. As this imaginary spreads globally, it is confronted with different food taste regimes. In Italy, a very similar change in street food trends from traditional ‘coach roaches’ to ‘gourmet food trucks’ has already been observed (Alfiero, Giudice, and Bonadonna 2017). The current research shows with new empirical material the existence of a strong Italian taste regime, which interacts with the food truck imaginary.

In order to get a picture of the food truck imaginary in the US, worldwide and in Italy we will use the compared search frequency of the topics ‘food truck’ and ‘street food’ (a topic is defined as a group of terms that share the same concept in any language) in Google web search, obtained from Google Trends data. Google Trends Search Interest is a normalised index of search frequency of a term and has been already used with positive results in scientific papers as proxy of attention by economic actors to firms (Da, Engelberg, and Gao 2011). Our goal is more modest and exclusively descriptive, interpreting the ‘food truck’ topic as a proxy for the food truck imaginary, and ‘street food’ as a proxy for an antecedent way of framing street food in line with national tradition. We aim to better delineate the influence of the American food truck imaginary at global and Italian level, using data from January 2004 (the first available date) to September 2018.

Both topics in all figures have a ‘mountain range’ shape, with the peaks corresponding to summer months and the cliffs to winter months, highlighting the seasonal nature of food truck activity and street food. More generally, the research interest in the two topics has a similar pattern over time, and a simple non-parametric test of correlation (Spearman’s test) between the two topics shows a significant monotonic correlation in all three cases (see Table 1). Reading the figures and tables together, we can summarise an insightful description of the development of food truck economic imaginary in the US, globally and in Italy. Food truck gourmet is indeed a phenomenon born



at first in the U.S. (Figure 1), that has spread globally in the following years (Figure 2), with a subsequent rise with minor frequency of a correlated ‘Street Food’ topic, which was almost non-existent before. Similarly to the rest of the world, Italy too seems to undergo the influence of the food truck gourmet imaginary from the U.S., as there was little interest for food trucks or street food before 2013 (Figure 3). Italy is the one country where, from the beginning of its emergence, the imaginary is mostly framed as ‘street food’ rather than ‘food truck’ (Table 2), denoting a configuration of the imaginary specific to Italy.

### **3. Methods**

This study is an ethnography of gourmet food truck operators in the city of Milan, Italy, composed of semi-structured interviews to them, field notes from one year of participant observation at street food festivals and events organised by individual food trucks, together with archival and secondary sources on the topic from specialised magazines and newspapers.

#### **3.1. *Siting the fieldwork***

We focused on Milan for several reasons. Indeed, Milan is the city with the highest number active food trucks together with Rome, both having 181 itinerant street food businesses. The region (Lombardy) leads with 389 businesses, significantly exceeding the 271 businesses in Lazio, i.e. the region around Rome (Unioncamere and InfoCamere 2018). Moreover, Milan has become a cosmopolitan global city with regards to fashion, media, and design (Dell’agnese and Anzoise 2011; Guerrini 2017), and was used for empirical researches on these industries (Arvidsson, Malossi, and Naro 2010; McRobbie 2016). More recently, in parallel to EXPO 2015’s ‘Feeding the Planet’, it has started to massively invest in urban food policies, linking them with the idea of an innovative city (Deakin, Borrelli, and Diamantini 2016).

#### **3.2. *Techniques and selection criteria***

As stated before, our ethnography is composed of semi-structured interviews with gourmet food truck operators and participant observation between 2017 and 2018, as well as archival and secondary material. The sampling strategy for the interviews can be defined as a non-probabilistic ‘purposive homogeneous sample’ (Etikan 2016): during our participant observation of street food festivals, we identified food truck operators that seemed to belong to the ‘gourmet food truck’ economic imaginary because of the visual appearance of the truck, their products and the way they were labelled. To a lesser extent, we also interviewed food truck operators identified while analysing secondary material (i.e. press articles). This means that, though all the interviewed trucks regularly participate in events in Milan, trucks based in other places were also included in our study. The final corpus of interviews is composed of twenty formal, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Almost all the interviews lasted between forty-five and seventy-five minutes (in two cases, the interviewee had only half an hour of time). The interviews were conducted with the founder or founding members, with only one exception constituted by an employee, chosen because the business owner did not work on the truck. To enrich the representativeness of the sample, two trucks

selling self-produced craft beer have been included, as well as two trucks serving foreign cuisine: one Italian truck serving American smoked meat and one Venezuelan truck serving Venezuelan ethnic food.

A table with individual biographical information is not included, as presenting the table would likely compromise participant identity. We will instead include a general summary of background information. The twenty trucks all have a different flagship product and represent eight different Italian regional typical cuisines, in addition to two foreign ones. Five of the food trucks were already associated with a restaurant, a food company or a pub when they decided to start, while one operator managed to open a restaurant after starting as with a food truck and another one started as a worker in a ‘scuzzy’ truck owned by his family before opening his own gourmet food truck. Half of the sample are in their thirties, four interviewees are in their twenties while the remaining six are over forty years old. Fifteen of them now live in Lombardy, of which eleven in Milan, two in Marche, one in Piedmont, Emilia-Romagna and Veneto. Another relevant element is their working background: six of them had formal experience as cook in restaurants or pubs, seven had experience in the food sector (agri-food industry, commerce, etcetera), another six had no formal experience in the food sector, apart from domestic cooking; one attended a vocational course on street food for unemployed.

We conducted participant observation in several street food festivals during the year, mostly during autumn and spring when most festivals and public events take place. We attended both street food gourmet festivals and public events with a different focus (parties, concerts, cultural or social events) in which food trucks were present upon request by the organiser. More rarely, we attended public events directly organised by one food truck. We collected field notes and visual material.

### **3.3. *Approaches***

The aim of the research as already stated is to bring empirical and theoretical contributions to the theory of production and consumption of taste in omnivorous cultural consumption. We follow Burawoy’s argument that ‘theory is not discovered but revised, not induced but improved, not deconstructed but reconstructed [...] theory exists to be extended in the face of external anomalies and internal contradictions’ (Burawoy 2009). Thus, we adopt the extended case method (Burawoy 1998), even though the nature of the phenomenon did not allow for a prolonged and fully immersed ethnography as required to completely adhere to the approach. We took an ethnographic perspective where the researcher is a reflexive actor in the process of triangulation between field, theory and social structures that derive from it (Tavory and Timmermans 2009). Applying the cultural political economy approach and its core concept of economic imaginary means putting the food truck operator, a micro-socioeconomic actor, in a broader socioeconomic structure necessary to perform the reflexive tripartite elaboration process between field, structure and theory required by the extended case method perspective.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. *Street food festivals: accommodating food trucks in Italy*

The empirical findings support the descriptive data obtained through Google Trends. All the interviewed micro-entrepreneurs refer to their activity and economic niche as ‘street food’, while they normally use ‘food truck’ to indicate the physical vehicle in which they work, and more generally the singular business. Significantly, everyone always uses both terms in English, street food and food truck, with only one exception in all the ethnographic material in which one food truck operator used the Italian word ‘*furgone*’ (in English ‘van’), before quickly adding ‘*furgone* sounds ugly, let’s say ‘truck’ [pronounced in English], it’s cooler’ (Monaldo). These elements confirm the influence of the street food concept in the Italian tradition combined with the American influence, clearly visible in the dominant use of English words and their association with ‘coolness’, as opposed to the ‘ugliness’ of the Italian terms. In other cases, this linguistic difference was applied to distinguish between traditional ‘suzzy’ vendors and gourmet ones, like in this excerpt by a food truck operator that is also a good definition of the fundamentals applied by gourmet food truck operators in Italy:

I do not want to be discriminatory because even the ‘paninari classici’ [in English ‘Classic burger man’] make delicious sandwiches, but, technically, they stick to the conventions [...] [in a food truck instead] you must create a competitive advantage through differentiation. It’s the same thing you must apply to street food: high specialisation, strong territorial belonging, only make a few products but with ingredients of the highest quality you can find.

(Biagio)

Another crucial difference between the American and the Italian context is the place and context in which food trucks work. In the US, both historic roach coaches and contemporary gourmet food trucks are associated with workers’ lunch breaks and more in general with quick meals served on the streets (Hendrix and Bodwish 2018; Irvin 2017), while in Italy the habit of spending lunchtime sitting at the canteen or at the restaurant combined with strict regulations against the temporary occupation of public area favoured the fusion between the historic tradition of county fairs and the gourmet street food imaginary into a trending scene of itinerant street food festivals. The vast majority of Italian gourmet food trucks work in these festivals. Despite their popularity, street food festivals are also criticised by food truck operators and most operators consider it impossible to reach economic viability just through them: the most common complementary source of income is offering catering services for private clients, which are significantly more profitable but irregular in their frequency. In general, a common opinion is that ‘street food’ is a trend that has already reached its peak, and that the explosion in the number of trucks led to excessive supply, cutting down the margins for profits.

During the ethnography we observed a number of other relevant consequences of the proliferation of festivals: on the one hand, food truck operators interact much more and develop a network based on mutual help (especially towards newcomers) and exchange of expertise and information. On the other hand, the competitive pressure to attract the wandering visitors increases the urge to stand out from the crowd of food truck operators. The lack of trucks selling foreign food is another remarkable feature. During the months of ethnography, the only food trucks selling foreign food we encountered were the two interviewed and two other food trucks, one owned by a foreigner and one

by Italians, whom we were unable to interview.

#### 4.2. *Food truck operators as taste dealers of authenticity*

I would like to define myself as a ‘*taste dealer*’, a pusher of taste.

(Lamberto)

All food truck operators have the clear feeling that creativity and authenticity are critical concepts in their business. As one food truck operator synthesised:

What’s *creative* about a bruschetta? First, it is a formula of food, because to be fair the bruschetta is like an appetiser, which is usually served with tomato. But we are from Altamura, the home of Italian bread, so we start from our origins, although we apply them in an innovative way [...] taking the ingredients, mixing them, taking what is typical of a region and mixing it with other (ingredients)...[...] it is *creativity* that allows you to stand out. [...] The *authenticity* of what we do is the element that gives you this reaction [*of satisfaction by the customer*] [...] when they take a bite of our bread they taste something different from what they usually eat.

(Muziano — Italics by the author)

Creativity is needed to stand out from the crowd and to innovate from tradition. Authenticity emerges as a complex concept, illustrated with a rather unconventional definition from the academic perspective: it constitutes the expression of an act (‘the authenticity of what we do’), materialised in the final product and concretely perceived through it (‘when they take a bite of our bread’), appreciated by customers and recognised as legitimate member of the economic imaginary ([it]gives you this reaction’). food truck operators are cooks, but also, more importantly, dealers of authentic taste: they aim to reproduce a taste recognised as authentic by their customers, as this also becomes a critical asset in order to sell food in a crowded street food festival.

Following the assumptions of cultural taste as an activity and not as a passive, determined state (Teil and Hennion 2004) and the socially constructed and fluid nature of authenticity (Peterson 2005a), we argue that food truck operators are taste dealers, or in other words ‘claimers of authenticity’. Every process of authenticity reproduction is rooted in its own local origins and culinary traditions. We can conceptualise this in the notion of ‘typical’, a quality of food that is contemporaneously recognized as belonging to a specific regional cuisine but also acknowledged at national level as outstanding (usually through common knowledge or a food certification). Therefore, for a food to be displayed as ‘typical’ there must be a link between the food and a place: this goal is commonly achieved using raw ingredients or recipes that are already considered typical, through a symbolic synecdoche from one component of the food to the entire product.

However, being ‘typical’ is not enough to ‘be authentic’. What still lacks is the guarantee for the customer that what is sold as typical of a region or a city actually comes from there. The proof of authenticity is carried out by customers only when they taste the food. We will deeply analyse this aspect in the next section, but we can already suppose that ordinary customers do not have specialised knowledge; they have to rely on the credibility of the producer. Food becomes credible as typical if the claim of authenticity expressed by the food truck operator also appears credible. This is reached through a personal connection between the producer and the place on which the notion of typicality is tailored. In other words, the connection between the producer and the product must be ‘genuine’ in its etymological meaning of recognition

of a kinship between two elements. In the Italian context, where culinary traditions vary from city to city, individual origins or the origin of the family are the most common way to build this kinship between the typical product and the vendor. In the few cases in which this ancestral relationship is absent, such as in the case of Italian food truck operators selling foreign food, the strength of the genuineness is safeguarded by a similar intimate connection between the producer and the product, built on notions of experience, passion and expertise in the specific food culture and cuisine.

The exposed definition can appear restrictive and sets the bar very high, but it needs to be seen in the context of in the food truck economic niche, where the threshold of credibility expected by customers is higher than in other commercial contexts. Moreover, genuineness is a bond that is not only used in its symbolic dimension, but that can also imply some more practical and economic advantages: experience in the correct processing of ingredients, ability to better assess their quality, knowledge of the most reliable sellers and/or preferential supply lanes. The combination of the two elements, typicality and genuineness, can be seen in the excerpt below, where the process of formation of an ‘authenticity claim’ is described:

We started with where we live, with what our traditions were, my partner with Piedmont’s sausage of Bra and the Piedmontese meat Fassona and me in Veneto with the products of the park of the Dolomites. So, we started with two important ingredients. All our recipes are not created for the recipe, i.e. I’m not inventing a recipe or a plate because it came to my mind but [...] I start from the product. [...] I like to say that we are assemblers of high quality raw ingredients [...] In general, therefore, to be original is to tell the story of your land, your traditions and who you are.

(Brando)

The co-existence of both ‘typicality’ and ‘genuineness’ can be considered as the foundation for the reproduction of ‘authenticity’ to establish the product’s quality. The example above, in which food truck operators consider themselves ‘assemblers of high quality raw ingredients’, relying almost exclusively on them to build their claim, usefully stresses the function of genuineness: if their role is just to assemble raw ingredients that are already ‘typical’ by themselves, in theory any individual with any geographical belonging could perform the same claim with the same efficacy. What instead reinforces the credibility of their claim, distinguishing them from potential competitors, is precisely the genuineness, the kinship between the typical ingredients and the individual that allows food truck operators to ‘narrate their land and traditions’. In a similar way, another food truck operator who relied heavily on regionally-sourced raw ingredients to build an authenticity claim discussed his advantage over other competitors selling the same product, i.e. *mozzarella* typical of Campania, and emphasised the economic side explaining that ‘I have an advantage in the supply chain, as my father raises buffaloes in Campania’ (Biagio).

The majority of the food truck operators interviewed employed a hybrid combination of factors innovating from the tradition. The choice to innovate often depended either on the need to stand out more on the market or on practical reasons, for example when the typical ingredient or recipe, the constitutive element of the authentic food, was unfit for a mobile food vendor and for itinerant eating, like in the two examples below:

But the classic polenta is demanding, keeping it soft on the truck is challenging [...] So we decided to use the good old method of our grandma, who made the polenta, left it to cool, then fried it, and combined it with various products. One is the raspadura, that is

just a classic of Lodi, others could be gorgonzola, sausage, [...].

(Tamara)

We wanted to make purely homemade Italian cuisine. From there came the idea of fresh pasta, but going around with a truck cooking spaghetti or penne was not comfortable, so we invented the concept of enclosing sauces inside homemade ravioli. We started with carbonara and then continued with other sauces.

(Bonifacio)

The grade of innovation and differentiation from the original is variable (the first example being an innovation closer to tradition, the second a ‘braver’ gourmet one) and the typical element, the ingredient, or the recipe, must always remain clearly identifiable to enable the symbolic synecdoche to take place. But a conceptual contradiction inevitably happens in the exposed process: to innovate on typicality means straying away from the original and ‘authentic’ tradition, thus creating ‘inauthenticity’, so that ‘authenticity claims’ made by food truck operators are also built upon inauthenticity.

This contradiction can be understood only by taking into proper consideration the friction between the two co-existing identities of the food truck operators, already mentioned in our analysis. They are cultural actors who passionately promote the values of local, typical and genuine food in a new cosmopolitan context, and at the same time micro-entrepreneurs well aware of the need to be in tune with the discourses of the economic imaginary in order to successfully compete on the market. The coexistence of the two identities can, and many times does, find a more or less precarious equilibrium, resulting in a reflexive economic and cultural actor not dissimilar to the ‘self-interested theorists’ analysed by Rinallo and Golfetto (2006) in fashion markets, who operate following their own beliefs and passions but are nevertheless aiming at satisfying their personal economic interest, and in turn shape the economic imaginary and trends. In other cases, the tension between the two contrasting aims becomes evident, as in the thoughts of an interviewee about the choice to sell ‘*olive ascolane*’ (typical Italian stuffed olives) in a non-historical variation made with truffles:

Yes, that is something I regret a bit, but we had to do it because customers demanded it, whatever it takes...there was a little bit of truffle in the middle but there also was some truffle aroma, because unfortunately customers like the aroma of truffles, which is something that I do not understand...I care about raw ingredients and making products with an aroma doesn’t satisfy me that much. [...] Therefore, at some point, I said to myself: ‘Ok, we have to sell big volumes of products, but basically when one is economically stable, he should think about the territory first’, so I stopped, and I started to focus only on olive ascolane D.O.P.

(Michele)

In this case, the tension between the two aims becomes explicit as the trucker explains how he temporarily decided to consciously prepare and sell ‘inauthenticity’ because customers demanded this ‘inauthentic authenticity’. In general, compromises in the genuineness of the product to achieve customer satisfaction are a ‘necessary evil’ to stay on the market but are also perceived as something that should be avoided as soon as it is possible to do without; the compromise at the expense of authenticity seems to remain a sin to expiate.

Therefore, it is not surprising that one recurrent rhetorical device used by the interviewed food truck operators to define themselves by opposition is to distance themselves from the ones buying from wholesale distribution, excluding them from the circle

of ‘true’ gourmet food truck operators and accusing them of being just interested in the maximisation of profits. In this context, their two-faced nature emerges clearly if we look at the boundaries drawn between food truck operators themselves, whereby others are considered ‘similar’ or ‘distant’ to one’s own attitude and activism. Unlike cynic food truck operators buying from wholesale distribution to maximise profits without holding onto some values, the ‘authentic’ gourmet food truck operator is the one that ‘has a soul’, as is stated in the description of this embryonic project of a formalised network of gourmet food truck operators:

We want to create this network to try to distinguish ourselves through an ethical code, a series of guidelines related to prices, product origin, traceability, and the authenticity of the product [...] in the sense that...I do not know how to say it...you see, the kind of people who decide that they want to make fried fish because they think it will make them earn a lot of money, I do not want that kind of people in the network. I want the one who cooks and sells fish because they come from Lake Garda, and prepare you this lake fish, in five thousand different versions, but all deriving from that fish there [...]

We want everyone who has a soul.

(Lamberto)

The image of the soul is conceptually useful, even if it could be easily considered simplistic and *naive*, because it stresses the immaterial and ethical dimension of gourmet street food, as opposed to the ‘soulless’ nature of the purely economy-oriented street food vendors. The latter ones are considered free-riders because, unlike traditional street food vendors, they participate in the street food gourmet festivals and often use the same visual strategies and terms to frame themselves. However, by maximising their revenues at the expense of quality, they are thought of as not playing fairly in the competition to win over the customers. Due to the evanescent and immaterial quality of possessing ‘a soul’, there are no clear-cut borders between the categories, and most would not use ‘cheater’ as a descriptor of self.

Therefore, the boundaries between similar and opposed food truck operators are often conflicting with one another. Some of the sampled food truck operators buy products from wholesale distribution and, for one of them, the marketplace was the entry point to the gourmet food sector, thanks to cooking courses held by a renowned *chef*. In these cases, the choice to buy raw ingredients from wholesale distribution was not considered a critical issue. The production of authenticity relied on recipes rather than on raw ingredients. Identity by opposition was more easily expressed through contrast with those who use exaggerated, sophisticated ingredients but are not able to cook them to perfection, ending up with ‘deplorable products’.

The same structure applies to foreign food. In a landscape dominated by regional food, truckers of foreign food do not seem to invest much on the exoticism of the product; instead, they are willing to shorten the cultural distances, preferring to supply servings in a familiar and reassuring way, for example as a sandwich. A food truck operator of Venezuelan food commented the choice of adding to their original flagship product, a typical Venezuelan food called *tequenos*, another typical one as *patacones*, a sandwich prepared with plantains instead of bread, stating that people seemed more willing to pay the price of gourmet street food for something that is nourishing and has a familiar aspect:

You know, everyone sells sandwiches, bread with this or that...they all sell the same. We are happy anyway, but our problem is that we must educate people, there are people who do not even know what a *patacones* is. [...] There are people who told me ‘I thought *patacones* is a fish’. [...] I spend too much time making people understand what I sell.

But it's an effort that pays off, overall.

(Luz)

The product is still legitimised as authentic through the above-mentioned scheme, which confers typicality and genuineness to the products. The raw ingredients are high in quality even without the painstaking and meticulous attention which we generally observed in other food trucks, suggesting that the 'exoticism' of the final product, i.e. the allure of foreign food, is a quality sufficient to make it reach an adequate distinctiveness on the market without the need to resort to exceptional raw ingredients or to innovate upon the recipe. The difference in status regarding raw ingredients between national and foreign food trucks can also be explained by recalling the literal meaning of exotic as something that is distant to the point of being unknown and therefore extraordinary. As such, the knowledge of the customers about 'exotic' food is normally quite limited, and a lower degree of precision is sufficient to be recognised as 'typical': what has to be framed at a regional or urban level in the case of local food can be framed at a national level in case of foreign food.

#### **4.3. *The construction of a proper 'promise of taste'***

The confirmation of authenticity and distinctiveness to the course does not end with its material production. food truck operators are not contestants preparing food for a jury of experts that will try each course, but rather are street vendors that must convince people to stop and choose them instead of the one two meters away. In this section, therefore, the analysis will focus on street food festivals as the main places where food trucks operate and on the visual representations (Schroeder 2002) enacted by food truck operators to succeed in the competition for patrons with the aim to assemble a fascinating 'promise of taste'.

Street food festivals can be defined as a cosmopolitan canopy (Anderson 2004) where families, young couples, groups of friends or lone foodies wander looking for the perfect gourmet meal. The organisers often structure the festival like a gastronomic itinerary. Otherwise, if space allows, the trucks are more simply arranged in a circle and normally surround the central benches on which the wanderers eat. In street food festivals hours of hectic paces alternate with hours of almost complete inactivity. During lunch and dinner time, the wanderers become swarms of people calculating the best balance between their own preferences and the length of the queue, while workers on the truck take orders and serve products as fast as they can. food truck operators often describe the work during street food festivals as extremely chaotic and physically tiring: this is the moment when their job is very similar to the one of traditional 'scuzzy'.

It is in this cosmopolitan canopy, during its hectic moments, that competition takes place. The truckers have prepared or are cooking their food with an authentic and distinctive taste, but everything will be wasted if the customers will not be convinced to buy. A paradox of taste can thus be observed in gourmet street food: its assemblage is the defining feature of the gourmet food truck, but this quality can only be experienced after the customer has made a choice. Therefore, the actual taste of the serving (and the related pure skill of the trucker as gourmet cook) cannot directly influence the choices of the patrons and the economic success of the truck. In the words of one interviewee, 'the eye comes first' (Bernardo).

The relevance of branding to gain consumers' attention and build a sense of community through shared identities in contemporary economies is a long-established phenomenon (Arvidsson 2006) and is similarly practised in the food truck imaginary. The



first and central element of the corporate branding is, of course, the design of the truck itself. The trucks are the dominant visual elements in a street food festival. Their succession marks the rhythm of the space. Trucks, caravans, apecars (Italian vehicles with three wheels) and cargo-bikes are the most common vehicles, each one relying on its unique style with charm and a ‘hip’ look.

Aesthetically, I loved the apecar, but I realised that it did not have the necessary practical features [...] I discarded the American-style food truck because I did not like its aesthetics anyway, and it requires the support of another vehicle. Therefore, I opted for a caravan, a trailer vehicle, which can be hooked and latched to a vehicle.

(Lara)

When there is an explicit link to values, these are normally ecology and sustainable transport, applied through a ‘food bike’ (a cargo bike equipped to prepare and sell food). Apart from these exceptions, the food trucks are usually not related to the product they serve: their primary function seems to be to match the style of the owner and to be as original and recognisable as possible, catching the sight of the wanderers among the plethora of competitors. In one notable case, the micro-entrepreneur gave the name of a person to the truck, starting from her own nickname:

I have always been told to have the \*\*\*\* [*adjective removed for privacy, is a dialectal expression*], a permanent state of restlessness. So, I immediately opted for the name \*\*\*\* [*idem*], because I liked the idea, so first there was the name, then we built the idea for the truck around it.

(Veronica)

The truck is the visual element which has to demonstrate at first sight the membership to the gourmet food truck economic imaginary and the divergence from the category and imaginary of ‘scuzzy’ trucks. The choice usually falls on a hip and refined look, knowing that a ‘scuzzy’ is normally characterised by a kitsch aspect, with flashy colours, dated typefaces and generic names. Beside the truck, the other elements that constitute the core of the corporate branding and the visual ‘business card’ to customers are the logo and the name. The name is especially indicative because it is the only element that is typically chosen by the micro-entrepreneur or the group of associates alone, without professional help. Both the design of the truck and the logo are instead normally entrusted to professionals with a varying degree of participation of the trucker, and the aim is always to distinguish the truck from the ‘scuzzy’ through the use of upscale design elements:

I invented the name, while the graphic form was created by the graphic studio. [...] It is a nice logo because it is different from others in the street food business, it is a logo that looks more like that of a restaurant, a brand of a certain level.

(Pierluigi)

The practises and behaviours of the truckers represent the core of the strategy to build an effective ‘promise of taste’. In material and visceral terms, the goal is to make customers drool at the truck, so that they decide that their wandering is over. Both the graphic elements on accessories and the performances by truckers play a role. Performances include, for example, cooking demos on the spot, in a visible space on or next to the truck, to reaffirm the genuineness of the product and that tie of ‘kinship’ between the trucker and the food served.

Through communication we try to make it clear that we are artisans, sometimes doing live

show-cooking [*written in English in the original*] on the truck, thus giving a perception of the artisanship of the production.

(Lara)

Another common visual tactic to create a proper promise of food is the menu. Far from being a neutral element, presenting the servings is a critical act to stimulate the appetite and promise a pleasuring experience:

I have a colleague who makes a particularly good sandwich, but the name was simply ‘sandwich with pork strips’. In the sandwich with pork strips there was also *burrata* [*a typical Italian cheese like mozzarella*]. The *burrata* is very trendy lately, so I convinced him to change the name of the sandwich in ‘sandwich with *burrata*’, and now the sales are skyrocketing, just because there is ‘*burrata*’ written there.

(Carmelo)

After wandering around the festival and choosing the most promising truck, one joins a line of other future customers. Alternatively, the customer could be intrigued by some food but at the same time dubious. Here is where tactics that involve other senses come into play. For example, a commonly used tactic is to give out free samples, to let people try the taste and have a ‘free demo’ of the experience they will get if they pay for the entire serving:

and then we let people pick up a big part of our product, I do not say 15% but some 5-10% of the sausage we have is used in samples to attire the customer; when they decide to taste it, you have already conquered them.

(Brando)

If ‘first comes the eye’ as stated by the aforementioned trucker, the taste comes last: if customers decide to try the food, it is because they have already been convinced by the promise of taste, and just want to have a confirmation that there are no unpleasant surprises, or reassurance about some potentially dangerous properties of the raw ingredients (in the case of the quote just above, raw sausage). Lastly, an important part of food truck operators’ job is to ‘educate’ the patron about the food. One example is the following excerpt in which a trucker talks about the problems caused by a way of cooking, which is smoking, that makes food appear as if it were raw:

When people open the chicken and see the red part outside, they do not understand that the red is outside, not inside, then they come back saying the meat is raw [...] In addition to selling my food I must continuously give explanations.

(Pierluigi)

Here the two-headed nature of the food truck operator and the commingling of economic and cultural interests resurface. The worker shows his identity as a cultural actor transmitting the own values and ethics to the patron. Eating must be accompanied by education, giving the customer enough specialised cultural capital to be aware of the food and the values associated with the production of the food. At the same time, this process also has an economic goal, because explaining the values and the ethics involved is functional to the reason behind the high price of the food. A mobile street food vendor needs to cover high costs and he needs the customer to be aware of them. The credibility of the specific promise of taste and the education performed by the vendor are also essential for the recognition of selling prices as fair, and consequently for the profit of the business.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. *Toward a cultural political economy of omnivorous taste production*

This research constitutes an analysis of cultural omnivorousness with a focus on concrete interactions in the marketplaces, adding to a recent developing literature (Arsel and Bean 2018). The growing trend and economic niche of gourmet food trucks is explored as an economic imaginary and food truck operators are shown to be taste dealers, cultural claimers of authenticity and micro-entrepreneurs seeking economic viability. The aim is to take the first steps toward a cultural political economy of omnivorous taste production. The creation of cultural political economy has been motivated by the need of ‘putting culture in its place’ in political economy (Sum and Jessop 2013); conversely, this research responds to the need to put economy in its place in cultural omnivorousness studies. Thus, results have shown the reflexive and market-bounded nature of the process of the reproduction and assemblage of omnivorous taste. Reflexive because, as presented, food truck operators are actors who are conscious of their double identity, and who try to reach both cultural and economic objectives and mediate the intrinsic contradictions between them.

They are active authenticity claimers. In making suitable food, they assemble the food and produce the gourmet food trucks imaginary. At the same time, food truck operators are powerless spectators of the norms and the ‘ground rules’ to be followed to be a competitor in the economic imaginary itself. Moreover, they are market-bounded because the results have uncovered the fact - intuitive but normally concealed - that, although the values and frames enhanced by gourmet food are apparently intrinsic to the duty of the artisan to offer excellent food to the consumer, the process of assemblage of taste is not a detached act made only in the name of food quality and personal ethics, but is also a self-interested act stemming from the need to fight the harsh competition and be a successful micro-entrepreneur.

food truck operators, in our view, become dealers of taste. They act as ‘explorative creators’ (Weijo, Martin, and Arnould 2018) that seize the opportunity given by global consumption trends finding their own way to become distinctive market agents. Similarly to what has been described by CCT researches as ‘taste engineering’ (Maciel and Wallendorf 2017), taste dealing can be read as a strategy to reach success, in this case in both cultural and economic domains. This engineering is nevertheless concretised in the working act that produces the good to be sold in markets: through the physical assemblage of food, the omnivorous taste is translated from the general imaginary to a specific quality.

Taste dealing, then, constitutes the missing link that enables to connect the macro level of societal structures, institutions, and configuration to the micro-level of consumers’ agency and taste orientation. By adding this intermediate layer of market actors we do not mean to undermine or to question the consumers’ active role in influencing consumption habits, already demonstrated by a vast literature, but rather we wish to enlighten the role of micro-entrepreneurs. This role has been overshadowed until now. Future researches should progress towards the formulation of a general model of taste production, diffusion and consumption in markets between tastemakers, taste dealers and consumers, which is the ultimate goal of our proposed ‘Cultural Political Economy’ of taste. In this regard, we also hope that this perspective will spark an interesting dialogue with those who work on CCT and have called for increased attention to the ‘context of context’, understood as ‘the contextualisation of lived consumer experiences with another contextualisation, this time the one of systemic and structuring

influences of market and social systems that is not necessarily felt or experienced by consumers in their daily lives' (Askegaard and Linnet 2011), together with attention to cultural and market intermediaries (Smith Maguire and Zhang 2016).

## 5.2. *'Be authentic': authenticity as imperative of omnivorous taste regimes*

The results prove that authenticity is a relational quality: it takes form only in the mutual relation and agreement reached between an authenticity claim by economic actors and their customers. This process also includes innovation through creativity, in order to meet market requirements: authenticity claims also partially incorporate 'inauthenticity', conscious deviations from the typicality, to accommodate consumers' taste and reach market distinctiveness. Moving from the assumption of authenticity as a socially constructed (Peterson 2005a) concept that can vary across the social situations (Wherry 2006), we intend to go even further, stressing that authenticity, intended as quality conferred to a good, is always the hybrid outcome of the inherent tension between 'the logics of commerce and art' (Kjeldgaard et al. 2017) experienced by the taste dealer. This factor allows to understand the complex entanglement of paradoxes of inauthentic authenticities emerging from our findings. The economic imaginary relying on the omnivorous taste regime shapes both consumers' demands and the dealers' self-fulfilment upon authenticity. Thus, the food truck operator modulates his abstract idea of 'authenticity' governing his identity as a cultural actor who at the same time needs to satisfy market-driven necessities.

Indeed, during the ethnographic work every interviewee reported both authenticity and creativity as fundamental qualities to be successful in this job, with a clear similarity to the obligation of 'being creative' observed by McRobbie (2014) in the broader field of creative economies. Authenticity, then, becomes not only a quality to be possessed by the food, but also by the producer. This becomes explicit in the demarcation of the boundaries of 'real gourmet food truck operators'. Starting from the assumption that every food truck operator considers himself to be authentic, each one draws up a network of other food truck operators considered 'authentic' based on the resemblance to their own preferences and practises. Authenticity becomes clearly the most basic prerequisite to be considered a member of the clique of gourmet food producers. Given the centrality of authenticity for the formation of omnivorous taste regardless of the sector, and despite the need for further empirical evidence, the imperative disposition of 'being authentic' can be considered extensible to the broader category of omnivorous taste producers.

Thus, addressing the imperative of 'being authentic' as one specific variation of the general imperative of 'being creative' means exploring the normative dimension of economic imaginaries, in which dealers of taste are like sailors on the high sea: they can set the route and choose the vessel, but, if they do not strictly follow the navigation rules of the sea, they will soon end up shipwrecked. Similarly, food truck operators have the power to create the gourmet food they want to sell and to shape the appearance and distinctiveness in the market, but must at the same time conform to the resonant discourses that compose the gourmet food truck imaginary to avoid failing in this economic niche.

### 5.3. *Regionalism as a cosmopolitan attitude: Integrating theories about food cultural omnivorousness*

The literature offers examples of the idea of promoting and re-discovering local food mainly as an act of resistance to globalised trends through alternative value systems of belief, either with a positive or negative connotation of ‘reflexive’ against ‘unreflexive’ or ‘defensive’ localism (Feagan 2007; DuPuis and Goodman 2005; Winter 2003), and more in general the idea of a decline of place-based localism in the age of cosmopolitanism (Haller and Roudometof 2010). This contribution, far from rejecting the existence and relevance of movements promoting local food chains against globalisation and/or capitalism, suggests that global economic imaginaries about food have also subsumed localism and regionalism as constitutive elements of a cultural omnivorous taste, at least in the Italian context. This is in line with previous studies that claim localities do not disappear under globalisation but rather are reconstructed in local markets (Askegaard and Kjeldgaard 2007) and that cosmopolitanism can be a useful concept to frame local products as gourmet (Fonseca 2005). Regionalism, defined as a recognised system of values connected to the promotion of typical products and raw ingredients of a region or a local tradition, even when intimately connected with Italian ‘*campanilismo*’ does not express a parochial attitude in contemporary gourmet food production, but rather a cosmopolitan one.

This cosmopolitan attitude emerged from a regionally-oriented omnivorousness through three practices observed in the results: a wide use of Anglicisms to frame the gourmet food truck economic imaginary (‘street food’, ‘food truck’) and distinguish it from parochial ‘scuzzy vendors’ (described with Italian words); the use of refined ‘typical’ ingredients; a visual representation of the truck and the products heavily relying on a ‘hip’ aesthetics. In this regard, the visual strategies developed by food truck operators appear to be a mirror image of the ones observed by multinationals trying to adapt to local contexts (Aiello and Dickinson 2014): the latter used visual strategies to root a cosmopolitan brand in local context, in our case instead the aim was to give a cosmopolitan framing to regional products.

According to the results, regionalism and exoticism, the latter in the marginal number of cases in which it was employed, seem to be two equivalent qualities used to assemble ‘authentic’ food, and both come with the necessity to add genuineness to be credible. They fundamentally serve the same goal: they help to link the food to a specific place, be it a region, a city, or a foreign country, and they lay the foundations for the distinctiveness of the food truck, that is pivotal to its success in the street food economic niche, together with innovation enabled by the creativity of the trucker. The typicality infused by regionalism is therefore comparable to exoticism, as they are both ways to link a food to a geographic place; at the same time, they operate differently. Indeed, the act of tasting the typical could be interpreted as the contrary of the act of tasting the exotic: you seek the familiar rather than the unusual, the ‘true typical’ regional food you know so well rather than the ‘exciting unknown’ exotic food.

The results on the role of typicality and its predominance observed through the ethnography can lead to a partial integration of the theories about the frames of taste under food cultural omnivorousness. First, without challenging the relevance of exoticism in gourmet food production already observed in the literature in the American context (Johnston and Baumann 2015, 2007), this contribution argues that this relevance cannot be automatically extended to the global scale. In other contexts, the ‘exotic’ frame can be replaced, for example, by the ‘typical’ frame, serving the same function but being different in the ways it achieves it. Further research is necessary

to assess if this is specific to the Italian context or if the prevalence of typicality over exoticism is a feature that occurs also in other contexts characterised by a diversified and rooted food and street food culture. Future research could also examine how new frames emerge from other contexts.

In light of the previous contributions, we propose a more general integration of theories of gourmet food production in the age of cultural omnivorousness: food must ‘be authentic’ (and the micro-entrepreneur must be authentic, too) to be recognised as gourmet, and must be at the same time distinctive to stand out and be successful in the market competition. Gourmet food is presented as ‘typical’ or ‘exotic’ to produce authenticity and reach distinctiveness, with genuineness that allows typicality or exoticism to be recognised as such. Innovation on the tradition of typical or exotic recipes and raw ingredients reinforces the distinctiveness of a gourmet food truck’s offerings among a crowd of competitors.

## 6. Conclusion

This article explored the various phases of taste assemblage in the growing economic niche of street food as a relevant case study of the phenomenon of cultural omnivorousness, carrying it out in the peculiar Italian context. Looking to integrate existing theories of taste from collected ethnographic material, the article advanced both empirical and theoretical contributions.

From an empirical point of view, the article aims at partially filling a gap in literature about the concrete modes of assemblage of omnivorous taste, and gourmet street food in particular, from the perspective of food producers. It highlights the complex and conflicting co-presence of their identities as cultural actors and micro-entrepreneurs and distinguishes the different phases of the formation of an omnivorous taste: the complex and often contradictory creation of an authenticity claim through the craft of a culinary product, and then the strategies used to build a proper ‘promise of taste’ in the actual market where consumers and dealers of ‘authenticity claimed food’ meet. It contributes to the studies on omnivorous food consumption by performing empirical research in a fieldwork with a very rooted and widespread culinary culture and a great food diversity, allowing an assessment of its peculiarities.

From a theoretical point of view, the article is in line with the recent interest in markets and the economy in taste consumption and production, laying the foundations for a cultural political economy of omnivorous taste production. Gourmet food trucks are interpreted as an economic imaginary that shapes the nature of omnivorous taste production as reflexive and market-bounded, forcing the actors involved to imperatively ‘be authentic’. The economic actors that concretely produce the goods in a similar omnivorous context are conceptualised as taste dealers: they are not the ones that directly make taste, a process happening at the macro-level of the dominant discourses of the imaginary, but rather the intermediaries that *deal* taste, reproducing and assembling it through various frames.

Moreover, the analysis of taste production in the specific setting of the Italian food scene enables the observation of the subsumption of regionalism into an omnivorous, cosmopolitan taste, to the point that in contemporary food consumption regionalism expresses a cosmopolitan rather than a parochial attitude. In conclusion, in agreement with the combination of these theoretical assumptions, we suggest a more defined and general integration into the contemporary theory of omnivorous taste in food consumption, based on the binomial composition of authenticity and distinctiveness as

necessary qualities of gourmet food. We also suggest to consider typicality, exoticism, genuineness, and innovation as frames that can variously contribute to the formation of the aforementioned qualities.

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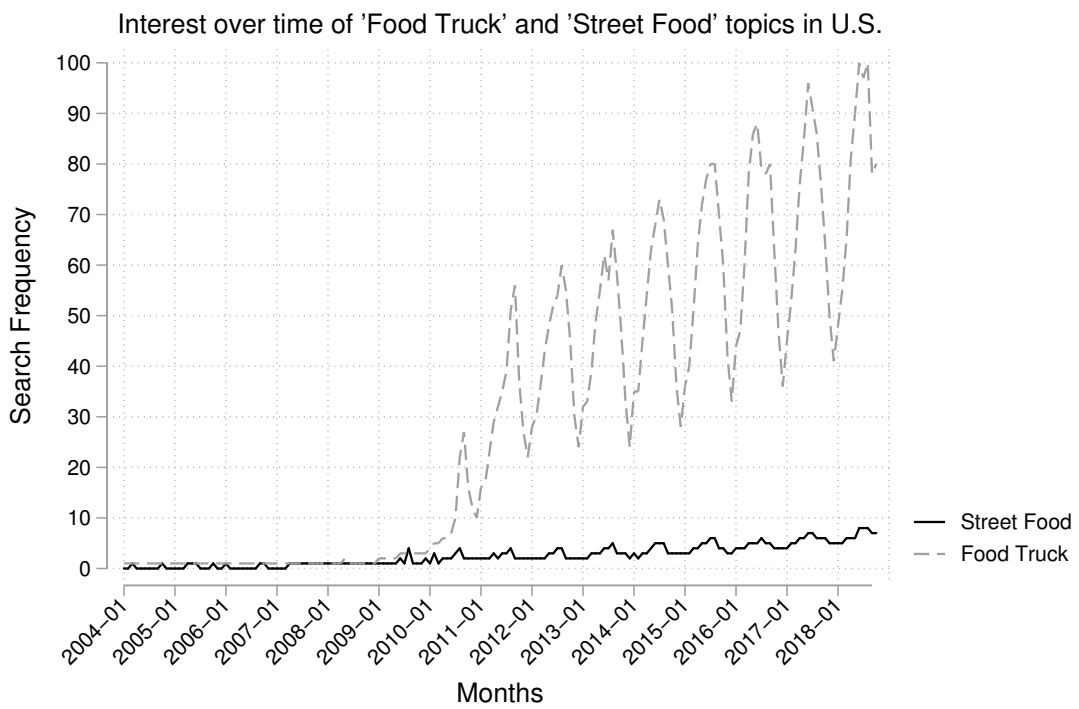
[Figure 1 about here.]

[Figure 2 about here.]

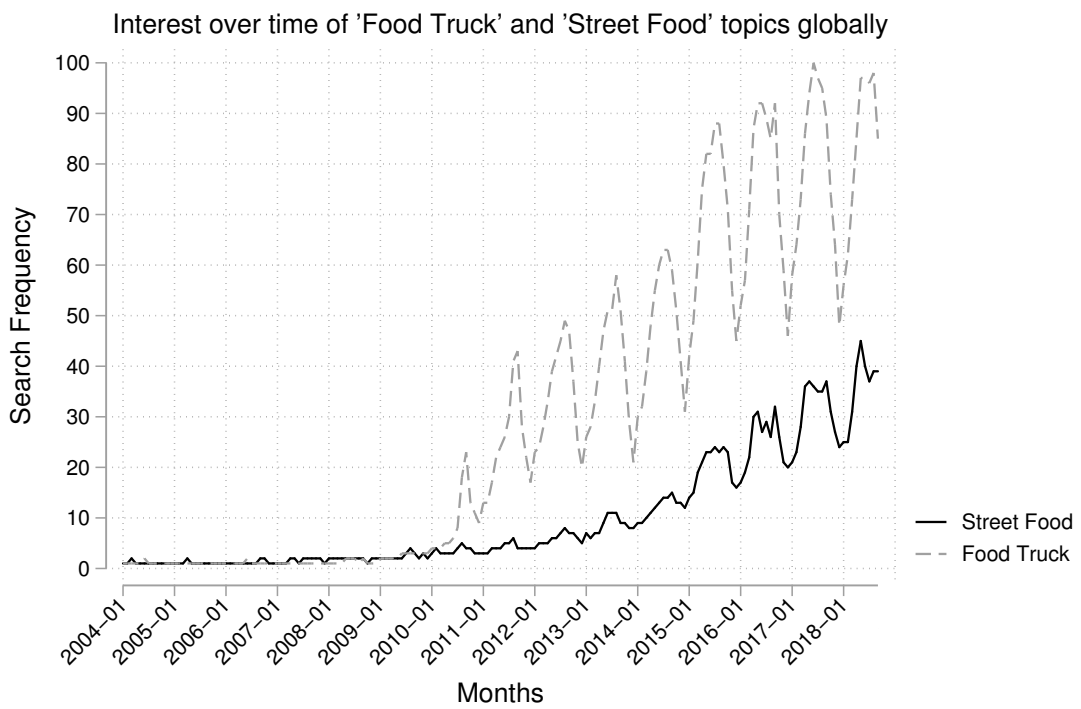
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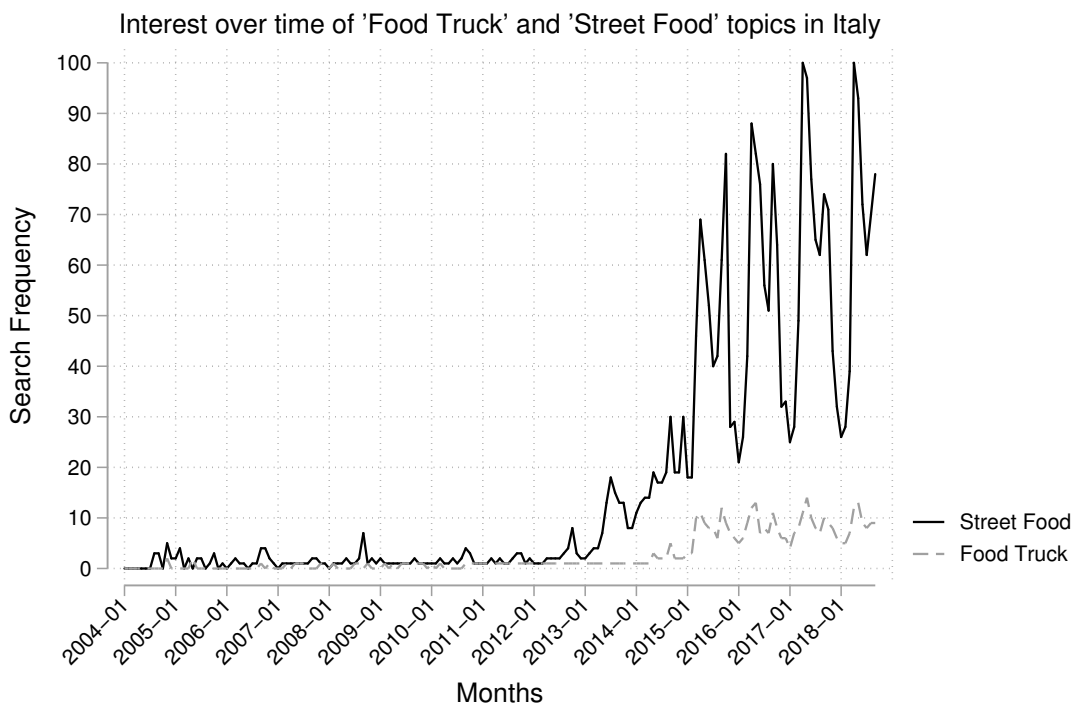
[Table 2 about here.]



**Figure 1.** Interest over time of 'Food Truck' and 'Street Food' topics in US. Source: Author from Google Trends data.



**Figure 2.** Interest over time of 'Food Truck' and 'Street Food' topics globally. Source: Author from Google Trends data.



**Figure 3.** Interest over time of 'Food Truck' and 'Street Food' topics in Italy. Source: Author from Google Trends data.

**Table 1.** Spearman's rank correlation coefficients

Case	Spearman's Rho	p-value
US	0.9400	0.0000
Global	0.9673	0.0000
Italy	0.8025	0.0000

source: Author from Google Trends data



**Table 2.** Title

Country	Street Food	Food Truck
Brazil	4%	96%
Chile	6%	94%
United States	7%	93%
Argentina	8%	92%
Belgium	11%	89%
Mexico	11%	89%
Colombia	14%	86%
Canada	15%	85%
France	16%	84%
Poland	23%	77%
Netherlands	24%	76%
Spain	24%	76%
New Zealand	25%	75%
Saudi Arabia	27%	73%
Japan	29%	71%
South Korea	32%	68%
Australia	33%	67%
South Africa	33%	67%
Sweden	39%	61%
United Arab Emirates	45%	55%
Malaysia	46%	54%
Indonesia	58%	42%
Germany	60%	40%
Switzerland	67%	33%
Thailand	67%	33%
India	71%	29%
Hungary	75%	25%
Austria	77%	23%
Philippines	78%	22%
United Kingdom	80%	20%
Singapore	83%	17%
Italy	88%	12%

source: Author from Google Trends data