

Food as Evidence of Colonialism and the Capitalocene

August 27, 2020



[From Issue 31:](#)

[Politics of Food](#)

[View](#)

Contributors: [Cooking Sections.](#)

Since 2013, Cooking Sections (Daniel Fernández Pascual & Alon Schwabe) has been examining the histories of colonialism and the geologies of capitalism through the prism of food. In this interview, we ask them about the research and installations they have developed.

LÉOPOLD LAMBERT: Could we start this conversation with a few definitions? How do you define “food,” “cooking,” and “cuisine?”

COOKING SECTIONS: Food became a very important tool for us since the moment we started working together back in 2013 — basically a tool to understand a landscape at large, not only from the perspective of growing, consuming or organizing territories in different ways, but also through political struggles behind power regimes. Through that lens of edible produce, we use food as a way to explore some of these questions, and imagine scenarios or alternative futures. Of course it relates to cooking, the act of mixing all of these ingredients in a more

figurative or literal sense, but it was also important for us to bring multiple disciplines in that understanding of landscape, space or the built environment. So that's why we thought with Cooking Sections we could start other methodologies that could combine all of these different approaches.

In the past year, we have been reading about the history of food production in France, in particular two books; one is Rebecca L. Spang's *The Invention of the Restaurant* (2000) and how the restaurant came about; a class differentiation in society within post-industrialization and modernity if you want. When cuisine became "a thing", especially for certain elites, that materialized in space of the restaurant as invented in Paris — bouillons restaurants, a place to have a concentrate soup to restore the body. The word "restaurant" was popularized then as the place to restore bodies, but we like to connect that to more present conditions and think of the restaurant as a place to restore ecology and all possible organisms as well, not just human bodies.



The second connection is Emma C. Spary's *Feeding France, 1760-1815* (2014), which explores two approaches. One is, again, how to feed the elite, and the other how to feed the popular masses, especially around the time of the French Revolution. And that is when you need to start thinking about how a nation-state needs to produce sugar to fuel workers at a time when Caribbean sugar was no longer available because of the Haitian Revolution. The nation then became invested in inventing alternative sugar sources, in the case of France, from domestically grown sugar beets. So that is the other side of cuisine, as a national project launched when colonization and imperialism starts to crumble.

LL: You are part of the few artists and designers who can explain their practice in one clear sentence. In fact, you write that Cooking Sections "explores the systems that organize the world through food." We'll talk further about some of these systems but could we remain within the abstraction of a definition for the moment with you telling us more about the extent to which the world is organized through food?

CS: It is not groundbreaking to think that the world is organized through food, as everyone consumes it several times a day (hopefully). And yet, the way we use it provides us with a tool to understand the different territories around production systems, large-scale infrastructures, transoceanic transportation, forms of livelihood... Alongside, you can actually also understand pollution, soil exhaustion, climatic changes, as well as class and racial inequalities among many other things. So in a way, food systems start conveying all different factors that, for us, are relevant, or at least interesting, to understand the capitalocene. In our practice the spaces that result from such complexities can be first critically used to tear things apart, which is sometimes easy. What is challenging though is to start thinking of interventions to keep things together, forms of action that can start modifying bits and pieces along the food chain to understand the implications of any of these disruptions and potentialities.

LL: Your project “Empire Remains” examines “the contemporary history of imperial fruit, sugar, rum, cocoa, spices, and condiments.” Could you consider a few of these items or others and retrace their colonial lineage and exploitation?

CS: The “Empire Remains” started by looking at the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) in Britain and their propaganda machine in the late 1920s. It was a governmental body to promote products from the colonies and overseas territories of the British Empire. They commissioned films, posters, recipes to different artists, who were to capture colonial products and produce in their landscapes of origin to familiarize people and accustom the British imaginary with how they were farmed, distilled, or transported. Those depictions were visually appealing and yet racist, sexist and brutal, as they carried the whole colonial violence perpetrated in different “styles.” The EMB also envisioned to run Empire Shops, as they called them, where you would find ingredients from all across the Empire. This was their way to indoctrinate the British public on how to consume more and more of them. Those shops never opened because the economy and tariffs system started to change in the early 1930s. So we decided to revisit that format and expose what would be the legacy of those lineages or supply chains today to understand the ongoing consequences of the British Empire, still very present today. We have seen that even more clearly with Black Lives Matter. But if you start looking at every banana cultivars or certain types of sugar, as I was mentioning before, you start understanding centuries of violence that are still inflicted upon people and landscapes and all kinds. The Empire Remains Shop was the framework we developed to explore these still very present remains of the Empire (not only British).

The type of produce that was coming back to Europe was the result of a very long engineering process. In the case of the Cavendish banana, for instance, which is the yellow banana that we find in almost every supermarket today, it came about after a careful selection of cultivars that took years to perfect. That was the role of newly invented spaces in the past centuries, like greenhouses and glasshouses for artificial tropical

climates, to provide for such colonial/agricultural experiments, which have a whole history of architecture embedded in them. Joseph Paxton, the architect of the Crystal Palace, was a key figure. He devised these glasshouses as Empire machines for the development and cultivation of the Cavendish banana, named after his employer Lord Cavendish. Eventually, that was the banana that took over the world: it resists travelling and shipping very well. What is important to understand is how all these parts of the story are intimately connected. On the one hand, the ambition of an aristocrat in England to cultivate bananas, and on the other, how that ambition translated into eradicating, or taking over, many varieties of banana cultivars that are not resistant enough to be shipped for months. This has led to an exponential increase in monoculture and different diseases... we all know this story that repeats itself; it happens with every animal or plant intensively farmed. But yes, you can start tracing all those links through certain foods, and the Cavendish banana is an interesting example of that.

LL: Could you tell us about the colonial history of the British pudding?



"CLIMAVORE: On Tidal Zones." /

CS: The EMB also invented recipes for people to use some of their Empire products. They wanted buyers to use cinnamon or cloves; so they also had to teach them what to do with them, since it was a whole new ingredient for the masses. And that translated into the Empire Christmas Pudding — of course there were non-Empire puddings before. The pudding as a format was nothing unusual, but what the EMB did was to invent a mixture with all possible spices and condiments from the colonies in order for people to buy more: the Empire Christmas Pudding. We revisited the recipe and used it as a tool to understand the postcolonial legacy of the same ingredients. To make the “Empire Remains” Christmas pudding implied going to the supermarket and trying to find all these very branded ingredients with certain origins...you immediately realize how these origins have been replaced today. Most spices are no longer from specific countries, but packed in the U.K. — with an uncertain origin. That allows big chains to change the origin according to geopolitical conditions, war conflict here or drought there, they can just change the country of origin and sell everything as “packed in the U.K.”, or “produced in the E.U.”, or for instance in the case of flour “milled in the U.K.” This is an interesting shift, which tells you a lot about global economic dynamics and what we see as a shift from “made in” to made “nowhere.” This neoliberal consumerist logic has brought an onset of violent constraints of labor relationships, forms of collectivity, and farmers rights that are all being masqueraded. That’s how we used the pudding.

vLL: Recently, you’ve held a conversation about food boycotts and other forms or food-based political resistance in South Africa and Palestine. Can you tell us about it?

CS: That was also part of the Empire Remains Shop. We invited other people to contribute to the project, around forty participants that did performances, talks, sculptures...all kinds of contributions. One of them was a discussion between Elisabetta Brighi, Daniel Conway, Nitasha Kaul, and Laleh Khalili, around food boycotts in relation to identity and

resistance struggles. Laleh put forward how za'atar (wild thyme) in Palestine has been instrumentalised as a way to restrict Palestinian movement in the landscape. Forbidding the foraging of za'atar has been a control strategy deployed by the Israeli authorities in the name of environmental preservation, but it also implies that Palestinians cannot just roam around the landscape looking for a plant that is key in their diet and cuisine. Daniel Conway presented how grapes and wine played a role in apartheid South Africa leading to an international boycott on grapes or wine from the country, as a way to put pressure in the racist policies in place, from the 1980s. He also talked of its legacy today in terms of contemporary vineyards owners in South Africa; who are the laborers that are working those vineyards; and, what are the unequal labor relationships...how the country has moved from apartheid into another system that has a whole set of problems as well. It is far from being solved, as class and racial divides between vineyard owners and vineyard workers are still ongoing. And finally, Nitasha Kaul, exposed the politics of beef in India, and how Hindu supremacists have used the act of banning beef, appropriating global environmental concerns around the impact of cattle farming to target and suppress the Muslim population.

LL: With CLIMAVORE, you're constructively thinking of food in a context of radical climate change that food either accelerates or decelerates. Could you start by describing a few projects you worked on for this series?

CS: CLIMAVORE started as a way to understand how to eat as humans are changing climates and the new seasons that have emerged. In the Global North, it is not rare to find strawberries all year round, or salmon, or certain fruits. So, if summer, winter, autumn, and spring are diluted in mainstream supermarkets, we need to start thinking of the other seasons that are starting to appear and are radically shaping the landscape in different ways. For instance, in a period of drought or a period of polluted ocean, how would you shift food practices accordingly? What we have been doing with CLIMAVORE is to think of those seasons and have different iterations according to the different locations where the project

takes place. In the Isle of Skye in Scotland we have been looking at all the pollution from salmon farms and how all of their excrements, antibiotics and food colouring substances are leaking into the seas and creating dead zones. It's pretty much like battery chicken farms but under water. As a response, CLIMAVORE has been working out a transition for the island to divest from salmon farming and venture into regenerative aquacultures.

LL: With a very strong focus on the notion of tides and a beautiful installation where you invited people to eat during low tide what the high tide had brought.

CS: We built an underwater structure that appears and disappears with the tides. We used it more as a platform to have performative meals with politicians, residents, and different stakeholders to discuss alternative aquacultures. We started in 2016 with the intertidal structure, and now the project has been evolving and working within pedagogy in local schools, establishing a whole network of restaurants that removed salmon off the menu and introduced CLIMAVORE ingredients, and creating a program of cooking apprenticeships for the future chefs on the island to think of intertidal ingredients as alternatives to farmed salmon.

Another CLIMAVORE project that we started in Paris began by looking into the *appellation d'origine contrôlée* (AOC, protected designation of origin), which is a system that became quite popular in Europe over the past decades to connect origin and quality of produce/products. The original idea was to promote and help small producers to market their products. If a cheese is produced by a small farmer in a traditional way, it may carry better qualities than what is produced by a mega-scale farm. On the other hand, the AOC has also this darker history of how it came about in France with the colonial project in Algeria. The 1907 wine revolts in Languedoc exposed the clashes in the wine industry that had moved to Algeria, making the north and south shores of the Mediterranean compete for the "French" wine market. This later translated into the AOC system that would certify what product comes from where and whether

you are allowed to grow vineyards here or not, what belongs to a territory, and what does not. Now we are seeing with the climate emergency that all these regional food laws can be contested because you might not be able to harvest the same type of grape in Bordeaux within the boundaries of the Bordeaux region with the current Bordeaux climate, and then, what do you do? This is a huge debate in France, but also in other parts of the world. How do you shift the boundaries of a food-growing region when they no longer work anymore in terms of the wine that has been traditionally associated with that region: do you change the type of grapes, the traditional method, regulatory laws, or you start irrigating vineyards which is kind of a cultural sacrilege? With that project we have been developing a new vocabulary to link products with climatic changes and think of a wine that does not taste like strawberry, oak or gunpowder, but wine that tastes like a hot July, or cheese that tastes like a flowerless prairie. When cows graze in monoculture meadows, they are no longer eating a variety of micro-bacteria, which degrades milk quality and eventually affects the flora of the cheese and in our guts, so we better start shifting that understanding of what comes out of the ground.



Soil erosion in central Ukraine, April 2011. After decades of excessive tilling to work the soil to exhaustion,

LL: You describe how, if it was not for Algeria, French wine could have disappeared at some point, because there was a disease on the grapes that made all the vineyards sort of perish; is that right?

CS: Right, it was the phylloxera disease in the mid-19th century that made the whole wine industry in France collapse, and then pushed wine makers to move to Algeria. Algeria became the second largest wine producer in the world, which is quite insane, and again, created a whole social clash with the Muslim Algerian population.

LL: A technocratic paradigm to address climate change only thinks in terms of solutions. This led to situations where food would be suddenly used in huge volumes to “feed” scenarios where gasoline, for instance, was replaced by something deemed less ecocidal. Of course, this has for consequences the brutal disruption of entire ecosystems and, in that case, produced food scarcity. How do you think we can design a non-solution-based approach to climate change in relation to food?

CS: This is a question we ask ourselves a lot. The key point is to understand the complexities first; so, there is no direct cause-effect in the world we live in. There are so many stakeholders, and processes, and probabilities, and substances, and all kinds of tremendous amounts of things going on that it is very hard — probably not even possible — to find one solution for a problem because everything is so interconnected and the amount of agents involved is astronomical. What we try to do, sometimes, is to first map out all (or at least some) of the most obvious stakeholders as part of that context and see how through small interventions, things might shift a little bit to one side or to another side. For instance, food scarcity is not about the classic rhetoric blaming that there is not enough food to feed the world. This is not true. There has never been so much food production, but how is that food being evenly distributed, is it used to feed people, cattle, or biofuel plants... those are the questions that need to be debated. More importantly, we should not legitimize any mega-high-tech decision to resolve the problem of feeding

the world in one go, because it will not. There is a whole set of political structures and political will that has to evolve to start addressing what is actually going on. A non-solution-based approach is to avoid direct cause-and-effect. When you shift something a little bit this or that way you start understanding all the side-effects of that little intervention.

LL: Many of your projects, from Taiwan to Crimea via Palestine have to do with massive landscape modifications/erosion. Could you tell us how this relates to the politics of food?

CS: Certainly in many different ways. The project in Ukraine, for instance, had to do with the exhaustion of the soil and what happens after decades of adding fertilizers and chemical compounds to accelerate food production. But when the soil collapses and starts falling apart, what do you do? Again, there is a whole set of farming policies around the use of chemicals, or even land ownership schemes, that facilitate one model or others. Understanding these entanglements between policies and soil exhaustion can perhaps shed some light on the political statements behind actual food production. In the case of Taiwan, which has been facilitating the opening of fish farms to provide food, there is nonetheless a certain moment when the upscaling of that system surpasses a limit and then pumping groundwater implies that the region starts subsiding several cm a year. And there is no way back. You cannot just pump water back into the underground and then expect the land will levitate. The question is then how do we deal with the resulting landscape, exhausted and depressed, and you shift to other forms of food production. Otherwise the land will keep sinking. There are no direct solutions. It is more about how to start taking some sort of action, or at least, tackle some of the causes that have led to that scenario.



Entangled water pipes pumping groundwater for fish farms in Jiadong County, Taiwan. The sheer volume extracted over decades has led to subsidence all over the region. / Photo by Cooking Sections, 2019.

LL: And, of course, the question of infrastructure is very central to this. When we think of infrastructure we think of the North Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), or other pipelines in various Indigenous land from the Amazon to British Columbia. But in the case of Taiwan you have pretty incredible infrastructures that are much less sort of state induced and much more each fish farm creates its own infrastructure, but then with this incredible entanglement and everything... could you both describe it and tell us more about it.

CS: In the case of fish farms it is very different in different parts of the

world. In the case of Scotland, like we were mentioning before, it is a business that has been taken over by mega-big corporations, mainly Norwegian that have been farming salmon in places that have less environmental restrictions than in Norway. That's why they moved to Scotland, or to Chile, Tasmania, Ireland, or Iceland. That move has a very big corporate structure behind, whereas perhaps in Taiwan it has been much more an initiative of smaller fish farms or shrimp farms that slowly grew, which have a completely different structure. But in both cases they are regulated by created supply and demand. The question that remains is how do you regulate the environment and whether we can/should at all; how do you create certain limits to certain scales of things, and more importantly, how do we start regulating humans, the most invasive species on this planet. It is always a matter of relative size. Growing a single cow is very different from farming a million cows next to each other. The question is perhaps not the poor cow, but the sheer numbers of them. So let's start limiting the size and scale of things through policy, global supply and demand, and more common sense international trade agreements of imports and exports; there are many many factors that affect that. We just need perhaps to look at ourselves from a certain outside. ■