

Celebrating Asparagus: Community and the Rationally Constructed Food Festival

George H. Lewis

"Traditions are always defined in the present"

Regina Bendix
Inventing Traditions For Whom? (1989: 137)

"Asparagus ice cream:...Ya gotta love it!"

Festival Goer, Stockton Asparagus Festival (1997)

Popular festivals that purport to center on, and revolve around, food are a social phenomenon encountered in virtually all human cultures, from the ritual banquets of ancient Rome to the chili cookoffs of Texas today. In all cases, the colorful variety and oft-times dramatic intensity of these social gatherings have underscored the deep cultural meaning that underlies them, both for natives of the communities involved, and travelers, tourists, and casual visitors who have attended—and many times informally chronicled—these events.

Although festivals as a general social form do have a history of academic study,¹ with some few exceptions (see Humphery and Humphery, Bonner, and Sokolov as examples), the *food* festival has received far less attention than many of its other types based as they are around foci such as games, music, seasons and/or religious events. This is unfortunate, as the food festival has always been a central source of cohesion and cultural meaning for human communities. As Robert J. Smith has noted, "The central function of this festival seems to be to give occasion to rejoice together—to interact in an ambience of acceptance of conviviality.... The satisfaction creates a bond between participants; they have had pleasure in each other's company"(67).

In American culture, this social meaning of the food festival can probably be traced back at least as far as the invention of the myth of the "first Thanksgiving," with its reaffirmation of community for the Pilgrims,² and its (fictive) celebration of a democratic cultural sharing with Native Americans (Lupton, 26). Ignoring the shaky and often-times exploitative relationship the settlers actually had with

these Native American groups, this myth of the dominant culture invents a "reality" of the forging of social bonds of mutual respect between these two groups—and of their cooperation, sharing, and "pleasure in each other's company" (Siskind). The food festival as an American cultural event, then, likely rests on similar mythic reinterpretations of reality that define these events as existing almost outside the constraints of reality itself—community can be both invented and celebrated at such festivals. And, hopefully, some of this fictively instigated social cohesion will actually remain in the community once the festival is over—to (again, hopefully) be ritualistically renewed the following year.

Along with this ideologically fostered belief in the worth of community cohesion, there is also the uncomfortable social reality in America of a history of racism, competitive cultural pluralism, and the symbolic and actual mistreatment of immigrant groups (as well as the exploitation of Native Americans and Black American descendants of West African slaves). These uncomfortable facts can perhaps be masked somewhat by celebrations of difference in the relatively neutral area of food preferences. Given the fact that ethnic foods in this immigrant nation stand out sharply as cultural markers against the bland culinary sameness of "American" steak-and-potatoes cuisine—it is not surprising that the bulk of academic attention paid American food festivals has focused on this ethnic form and the usefulness of the form in underscoring in-group pride even as it (hopefully) creates multi-cultural cohesion in American communities (see Brown and Mussell, and Udell and Wilson for discussion and examples).

And yet there is another type of food festival that is increasingly commonplace in defining cultural forms of community in America. This type of festival which has attracted nearly no academic attention and which I shall term the *rationally constructed food festival*, is linked to no ethnic heritage, but instead "celebrates" a particular foodstuff, and by so doing,

attempts to link this foodstuff to a particular community, or region—such as Waxahatchie, Texas', Cabrito Cookoff or Rockland, Maine's, Lobster Festival do.³ Festivals of this type are "invented"—usually by groups who have an economic interest in generating business and public relations in an area, and can be viewed as using a fictive altruistic and mythic model of community celebration as their rationale, while at the same time being centrally focused on attracting attention and dollars to particular communities and groups. These commercially constructed festivals have proven to be highly popular in America, and routinely attract thousands with their mythic rationale and ritualistic activities. As such, they are popular culture events that deserve much more attention than they have been given. Such a festival is Stockton, California's annual celebration of asparagus—the case study this paper focusses upon, and to which this essay now turns.

The Stockton Asparagus Festival⁴

Since 1986, on the last weekend in April, the City of Stockton, California, has become the joyous host to King Asparagus, the edible spear that festival publicists have dubbed the "Cadillac of Vegetables." The Asparagus Festival, sponsored by the Stockton-San Joaquin Convention and Visitors Bureau, was described by Joe Travale, the executive director of the Bureau when the festival was first born, as "not only a celebration of the annual asparagus harvest, but as a vehicle to raise community pride and spirit" (Travale, 13). In its first year, it attracted 20,000 celebrants and by 1997, the twelfth year of operation, paid attendance for the three-day event had climbed to nearly 100,000. Over its twelve years, the festival has raised nearly 1.75 million dollars for area non-profit groups, as well as obviously high, but unreported, levels of profit for promoters, entertainers, craftspeople and local hotel and restaurant owners ([*Stockton*] *Record* 7 May 1997).

The festival itself, held at Oak Grove Regional Park (a good ten miles north of the city, in the heart of the agriculturally rich San Joaquin County Delta farmlands), includes many festival events and activities which revolve around this classic vegetable. The heart of the food celebration beats in "Asparagus Alley," which focuses on the uses and cooking of asparagus. Alley cooks offer such popular dishes as asparagus beef, shrimp and asparagus salad, and aspara-berry shortcake. In 1997, the three-day crowd consumed over 150,000 spears of asparagus, 2,000 pounds of pasta, 500 pounds of garlic, and 1,500 pounds of shrimp in Asparagus Alley alone

([*Stockton*] *Record*, 7 May 1997). Outside of the Alley, other booths, operated by charitable and service groups, continued the theme. While some of these booths offer more conventional dishes, such as deep-fried asparagus, others have attempted, over the years, to compete for the most bizarre presentation of the vegetable, ranging from chocolate dipped asparagus to asparagus tea and asparagus ice cream. The "best" of these recipes are collected and published in a professionally produced cookbook, which is sold at the festival and in local area bookstores. As of 1997, there have been two such cookbooks available, with the latest not only photographed in color, but shaped like a bundle of asparagus, itself!

Asparagus: Getting the Spear-it

Historically, San Joaquin County, located in California's Great Central Valley, is responsible for 65 percent of the asparagus production state wide, though this agricultural county is also rich in other produce, including corn, wheat, grapes, and cherries. In fact, when the top ten money making crops of the county are listed, asparagus is not among them. Why then, of all these possible crops, was asparagus the chosen festival vegetable? In an article in the local paper, written at the time of the first festival in 1986, asparagus was claimed by the author to be "more a Neil Sedaka to garlic's Liberace" (referring to the coastal town of Gilroy's already running and profitable Garlic Festival) ([*Stockton*] *Record*, 1986). The analogy is instructive. Clearly the aim was, early on, to create an appeal to an affluent, "with-it" pop crowd. Younger than Liberace, but just as glitzy, asparagus could be a class Vegas lounge act, too. This same article referred to asparagus as the "noblest of vegetables," while the founder of the festival, Joe Travale, called it the "Cadillac of vegetables," and recent (1996 and 1997) articles have dubbed asparagus "the Yuppie Vegetable." Clearly then, the saying, "you are what you eat" was taken to heart in hopes the labeling of asparagus as a "high class" vegetable would perhaps attract a crowd who aspired to similar status, thus enhancing potential money making opportunities,⁵ even as it reflected such status back on its self-annointed community of celebration.

While this vegetable, dating back to Greek and Roman times, has, in contemporary America, often been associated with the upper class, it has never been exclusively claimed by any one ethnic group, a fact that is also significant in its choice for a community that, along with San Francisco and Vancouver, B.C., boasts one of the most complex ethnic mixes on the West Coast. A key to stressing the openness and inclu-

sion of the Asparagus Festival was to choose a symbol with no previously defined ethnic ties. By focusing the festival around this ethnically and culturally neutral food symbol, all community subgroups could feel equally included, likely a significant point in the success of this festival (but, interestingly, one that was not verbalized in interviews with promoters nor reported on in the local papers).⁶

Promoters and creators of this highly organized and commercially constructed festival did however, consciously go so far as to consider this particular vegetable's gender appeal. Bill Kobus, local artist and creator of the initial (1986) Festival logo and poster, discussed asparagus' phallic connotation in an interview and further explained the need to add feminine quality to a "male" vegetable. For this reason, the original festival logo included numerous spears tipped in violet with a similarly colored ribbon wrapped around the bunch to "soften" and "feminize" its visual impact (Kobus). Thus, not only was the symbol designed to be viewed as ethnically neutral, it was manipulated in early promotional campaigns to add cross gender appeal. No matter how far-fetched and Freudian the logic of this gender symbolism may appear to be, promoters were careful, it seems, not to risk alienating significant portions of their potential audience.

Symbolic meaning, in terms of food festivals, also extends to their notoriously carnivalesque nature. Such celebrations are infamous for presenting unconventional images and experiences, ranging from the unexpected and slightly bizarre to perhaps even the out and out weird. These events offer opportunities for everyday folk to experience unorthodox (sometimes even socially taboo) indulgences in an "out-of-real-time" setting). Such experiences have been said to provide a "safety valve" function for communities by allowing participants to indulge in the traditionally unacceptable, such as concocting, or being served, "road-kill chili," getting sloppy drunk on green beer or flashing their breasts at a Mardi Gras parade, without negative social reprisal. In a word, festivals provide a safe place for an individual to let off steam by temporarily ridiculing, abandoning or rejecting his or her socially assigned roles and identity.⁷

The Asparagus Festival, in this carnivalesque vein, provides a (mild) forum in which to rebel against behavioral norms by eating strange food combinations such as aspara-berry shortcake, 'gras chili, and aspara-burritos. Such combinations are similar in nature to those that contribute to the "garlic weirdness" of the Gilroy Garlic Festival (which include garlic ice cream) as well as the bizarre dead squid

jewelry-wearing competition of the Monterey Squid Festival, or the slug martini drinking contest held in Fortuna, to name just a few other California food festivals of this type.

The bizarre is often paired with the silly—another form of crossing social boundaries—in these festivals. People buy and wear floppy green asparagus hats, cavort on the dance floor to live country music and generally make, what would be termed outside the festival context, fools of themselves. Thus, the festival can be a place "out of time"—an extraordinary social world where the constructions of everyday need not apply. Wearing silly asparagus caps or getting drunk and eating chocolate-dipped asparagus spears becomes, in the festival context, "normal" behavior. In this context, asparagus—as an "uncommon" vegetable—lends itself well to rituals both silly and bizarre.

The Asparagus Festival As A Rationally Constructed Type

The Stockton Asparagus Festival, as a food festival type, seems to fall midway between two parallel types of festivals discussed in the folk music field by Lee Udall and Joe Wilson as *commercialized indigenous* festivals and *non-community mono cultural* festivals (1978). The commercial indigenous festival is one in which "Chambers of Commerce, tourist organizations, and some private promoters" discover that a local folk festival can attract a much broader audience, and they move to promote it by looking outside the local area for revenues and audience. Transferred to food festivals, this model in many ways describes the Festa Italiana of Hartford, Connecticut, a festival that, from 1978 to 1985, grew from modest beginnings to become, at close to a quarter of a million people, one of the largest ethnic festivals in New England. Festa Italiana was finally discontinued because the local participants felt it had become too commercialized, which occurred as control of it passed out of local community hands and food vending of any sort became more important to the non-local audience than the original Italian *festa* spirit and celebration.

The non-community mono-cultural festival, in contrast, is organized by persons from *outside* the cultural group, has no basis of support within the cultural group, and makes no attempt to involve persons of the cultural group in its audience (Udall and Wilson). These festivals are organized by outsiders for an audience of outsiders. As such, they are pure commercial events, whose only tie to the community is exploiting its name or reputation for economic gain. An extreme

example of this sort of festival would be the Lukenbach, Texas, Chili Cookoff, which is staged in a near ghost town made popular by the use of its name in a country western song (Mishler).

Although the Stockton Asparagus Festival is located within the community (or on its outskirts), as commercially indigenous festivals are, it also has more than a hint of this non-community commercial gloss. From the beginning, its planning and organization has been handled by an (admittedly local) public relations firm which receives a \$2,500 per month retainer, year around, for this account. In addition, a good deal of the publicity generated by the firm for this event is directed outside the local community, in hopes of attracting outsiders to the area for a weekend of fun, food and good times. Finally, although the asparagus theme is strong and central to the festival, there are also many popular events and shows that have little or nothing to do with asparagus that are also featured. These annual occurrences include a large antique car show, a series of "arts and crafts" booths, dixieland jazz, country and "classic" rock bands, and an annual "asparagus run." All these events and displays (and others like them) are very popular with festival goers and—even though they have nothing whatsoever to do with either asparagus or Stockton, they have—over the twelve year life of the festival—become expected markers of its "tradition."

In a word, the Stockton Asparagus Festival uses local culture and foodstuffs as, really, an excuse to create, or invent, a tradition for purposes that are to some extent, economically important for the community, but are not, really, culturally significant in any indigenous sense. The festival does not resurrect age-old traditions of the Stockton area, nor of any sub-cultural groups which reside in Stockton.⁸ True, it celebrates asparagus because the vegetable is grown in the area; and it does so by cooking it and serving it in both conventional and strange ways. But the festival also includes a classic and antique car exhibition (which travels from one local festival to another throughout California), the "Asparagus Three Mile Run" (which is similar to runs staged at most festivals of this type in the 1980s and 1990s), and the selling of crafts and memorabilia from individuals who cruise the festival circuit in California and the northwest, selling similar commercially crafted items at each festival and fair they show up at.⁹ As Joe Travale says, "After attending numerous community events throughout California, I am convinced that Stockton is a perfect location for our own major fund raising event. What better theme than the Asparagus Festival?"

After all, we are the asparagus capitol of the world". Said in another way, asparagus becomes the "hook" to sell this festival to both the local community and to the outside world.

Thus, we have, in Stockton, a rationally constructed or invented tradition of festival. Very likely, before the festival began in 1986, few persons were aware that Stockton was the "asparagus capitol of the world"—even in Stockton. But now, the word is out, in California and throughout the country. The San Francisco *Chronicle*, a regionally distributed newspaper, has begun to mention the upcoming Stockton festival and devote space to asparagus recipes in mid-April issues for its self-described "more cosmopolitan" clientele. The festival has featured Joe Carcione, the San Francisco Bay Area's "Green Grocer" media personality and, more recently, cook show host and author Martin Yan. Both *Sunset* and *Family Circle* magazines have covered the event, as have CBS and PBS television, among other national media outlets.

Discussion

In California (and across the nation), the rationally constructed type of secular food celebration that Stockton's Asparagus Festival represents has become amazingly popular, most especially in the last decade. Perhaps the best known of these California celebrations is the Gilroy Garlic Festival, though there is the Tracy Dry Bean Festival, the Monterey Squid Festival, The Great Snail Festival and the Santa Cruz Brussel Sprout Festival, to name just a few. As Yuba City's mayor, Lawrence Mark, explained about their Prune Festival, "Everyone else already had asparagus or apricots or garlic or some other darned thing, so we figured, why not the prune? It's something to put us on the map again" (*Mercury News*) or as Beth Jeffcoat, director of Rohnert Park's Crane Melon Festival put it, "The City fathers were desperate for a festival of some kind.... we used the crane melon shamelessly" ([*San Francisco*] *Chronicle*).

Spawned by the desire of communities to put themselves on the map, creating positive images and symbols for themselves (which in turn, generates spirit as well as attracting tourists and business interests); and by the need of Americans to belong, to participate in community, to feel a part of social groups (even if these are contrived and last only for a day or two), this sort of invented community festival has become increasingly common in our culture. As has been pointed out in other cultural contexts, these sorts of invented community images can become, over time, accepted as authentic both by outsiders, who come to enjoy the good times and by the community

members who participate in them (or simply observe from their distance) (McIntosh). In this way, ironically, “real” tradition may (but by no means always) arise from these rationally constructed models, as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy.

The down side of this argument, though, is the fact that all too often, the images and traditions created are imitative and shallow. In the end, the “authentic” tradition of one community may be, for all cultural intents and purposes, much like any other—as interchangeable as local malls and fast food outlets. A three mile run in Stockton is little different than a two mile run in Santa Cruz. A stained glass piece on sale in Stockton may be on sale next month in Monterey. And, really, how different, in a conceptual sense, is asparagus ice cream from Gilroy’s garlic version?

And yet, with all this said, it is indeed true that, after twelve years, the invented traditions and rituals of the rationally constructed food festival have begun to bind the Stockton community together in ways that it was not bound previously. As Regina Bendix has pointed out in her study of folk festivals in Interlaken, Switzerland, the “invention” of such pseudo-events should not be interpreted solely as exploitation of a local community, as is often done in the literature. As she says, “the process of inventing traditions is always tied into the socioeconomic constellation of a community” (143). In Stockton, California, the creation of a rationally constructed festival is the result of mutual negotiation between insider and outsider groups. The tradition has thus created not only economic rewards for both sets of parties, but also—in a community that has had historically little sense of its own identity nor pride in its past—a sense of communality, history, and cultural connectedness. As one local celebrant wrote to the local paper after the 1997 festival, “When we wear our festival T-shirts, we are always proud when people ask us about our asparagus festival” ([*Stockton*] *Record*, May 13, 1997). And when outsiders do ask, they are likely to be told that, not only is Stockton the “Asparagus capitol” of the world, but that it likely always has been. As Bendix has noted, traditions are always defined in the present. This is nowhere more true than in the case of Stockton’s version of a rationally constructed food festival. Asparagus ice cream, anyone?

Notes

¹For general academic discussions of festivals, see Victor Turner’s *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and*

Ritual, Robert J. Smith’s *The Art of the Festival*, Jean Duvignaud, *Fêtes et Civilizations*, Alessandra Falassi’s *Time Out of Time* and Ray Browne and Michael Marsden, *The Culture of Celebration*.

²Although Thanksgiving was declared a national holiday by Abraham Lincoln in 1863 in an attempt to forge some sort of cultural cohesion and identity in a nation torn apart by civil war, it had been celebrated at local and regional levels prior to this time. Considered a “new” festival in America, Thanksgiving was likely a partial continuation of the ancient English Harvest Home Festival—the most important (and most rowdy) of the rural festivals celebrating a successful harvest. In the American actuality (as opposed to myth), Thanksgiving was celebrated with several days of heavy beer drinking, dancing and fisticuffs. Needless to say, there were few Native Americans present for this in-group display of ritualistic social deviance.

³This type of food festival is especially prevalent in California, where nearly every community seems to have its own, including the Banana Festival in Monte Rio, the Crawdad Festival in Isleton, the Clam Festival in Pismo Beach, the Zucchini Festival in Oakland, the Crane Melon Festival in Rohnert Park and the Sonoma Ox Roast. And that’s just a small sample from *Northern California*!

⁴In addition to personally having attended the festival for many of its years, the author is also indebted to Aura Kashin, who systematically collected festival data in 1989 and 1990, and whose input in that respect was important in providing evidence for the arguments contained in this essay.

⁵Asparagus, it is true, is an expensive vegetable, but this has a great deal to do with the labor intensive (and exploitive) nature of its harvest.

⁶With this multi-ethnic focus in mind, it is interesting to note that, in 1997, the main music stage featured country acts on Friday, blues and reggae on Saturday and Latin bands on Sunday.

⁷See Moore and Myerhoff and Bock for excellent discussions of this function of carnivals and festivals.

⁸An exception to this are the Filipino men who were first encouraged to come to the Stockton area in the early 1900s to harvest asparagus. They were employed almost to the exclusion of other ethnic migrants because, as the California Industrial Relations Director wrote in 1929, “they are considered steadier, more tractable and more willing to put up with longer hours, poorer board and worse lodging facilities than others” (Sheil). The task of harvesting asparagus was a backbreaking one for this ethnic group—and one that migrant labor (now mainly Filipino, Mexican and Southeast Asian) still perform, as each spear has to be cut at ground level by hand, and handled carefully, in order not to break the tip from the stalk. Asparagus, therefore, is not possible to pick by machine.

Unfortunately, no reference to the culture, history or sad economic plight of asparagus pickers finds its way into the festival—nor are these pickers socially or economically able to participate as celebrants themselves.

⁹To be honest, there are also some original works of art for sale at the festival. Created by local artisans, these items are “selected” by the Stockton Art Commission for inclusion and are unique to these artists (even if their form—stained glass, wind chimes, needlepoint, etc.—seem to be found at most other festivals of this type, as well).

¹⁰See Hobsbaum and Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition*, Lewis’ “The Maine Lobster As Regional Icon” and Lloyd’s “Paterson’s Hot Texas Wiener Tradition” for other examples of the invention of food traditions and their eventual cultural acceptance.

Works Cited

- Bendix, Regina. “Tourism and Cultural Displays: Inventing Traditions For Whom?” *Journal of American Folklore* 102, 104 (1989): 131-46.
- Bocock, Robert. *Ritual In Industrialized Society*. London: George Allen and Len Win, 1974.
- Bronner, Simon. “The Paradox of Pride and Loathing, and Other Problems.” *Foodways and Eating Habits: Directions for Research*. Ed. M. Jones, B. Ginliani, R. Kress. Los Angeles: California Folklore Association, 1983: 115-22.
- Browne, Ray, and Michael Marsden. *The Cultures of Celebration*. Bowling Green, OH: Popular Press, 1994.
- Brown, Linda Keller, and Kay Mussell. *Ethnic and Regional Foodways In the United States*. Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1984.
- Duvignaud, Jean. *Fêtes et Civilizations*. Paris: Weber, 1973.
- Falassi, Alessandro. *Time Out of Time*. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1987.
- Hobsbaum, Eric, and Terrence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- Humphery, Theodore, and Jan Humphery. *We Gather Together: Food and Festival in American Life*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research P, 1988.
- Kobus, Bill. Interview (by Aura Kashin), June 18, 1990.
- Lewis, George H. “The Maine Lobster As Regional Icon,” *Food and Foodways* 3.4 (1989): 303-16.
- Lloyd, Timothy. “Paterson’s Hot Texas Wiener Tradition,” *Folklife Center News* Spring 1995: 8-11.
- Lupton, Deborah. *Food, the Body and the Self*. London: Sage, 1996.
- McIntosh, William. *Sociologies of Food and Nutrition*. New York: Plenum, 1996.
- Mercury News*, 3 Feb. 1990: 23-A.
- Mishler, Craig. “The Texas Chili Cook-Off: An Emergent Foodway Festival.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 16.3 (1982): 22-31.
- Moore, Sally, and Barbara Myerhoff. *Secular Ritual*. Amsterdam: Van Goreum, 1977.
- Rauche, Anthony. “Festa Italiana in Hartford, Connecticut.” *We Gather Together*. Ed. T. Humphery and J. Humphery. Ann Arbor: UMI Research P, 1988: 205-18.
- (*San Francisco*) *Chronicle* 14 April 1994: E12.
- Sheil, Paula. *Immigrant Filipino Workers In Stockton*. Stockton: Record Publishing, 1997.
- Siskind, John. “The Invention of Thanksgiving: A Ritual of American Nationality.” *Critique of Anthropology* 12.1 (1992): 167-91.
- Smith, Robert J. *The Art of the Festival*. Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 1975.
- Sokolov, Raymond. *Fading Feast*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1981.
- (*Stockton*) *Record*. “Asparagus City.” 28 May 1986: B1.
- (*Stockton*) *Record*. “Viewpoint.” 29 April 1987: E1-2.
- (*Stockton*) *Record*. “Gras Success.” 7 May 1997: B2.
- (*Stockton*) *Record*. “Festival Was No. 1—Again.” 13 May 1997: A10.
- Travale, Joe. *Asparagus Always*. Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1987: 2-21.
- Turner, Victor. *Celebration: Studies in Festivity and Ritual*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1982.
- Udell, Lee, and Joe Wilson. *Presenting Folk Culture*. Washington, DC: National Council for the Traditional Arts, 1978.

George H. Lewis is Professor of Sociology, University of the Pacific, Stockton, CA 95211.