

Solidarity, Agonism and *Entre-soi* in the Village Meals of the Causse du Quercy¹

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Abstract: In the area of South West France known as Quercy, summer is epitomized by a succession of feasts in many of the villages: they last about 3 days and always culminate in a communal meal on the Monday night. Social actors and commentators claim that these feasts and the communal meals are festive affairs : indeed they are, but underlying tensions are particularly obvious during the preparation and consumption of the communal meals where features associated with community building coexist with mild rivalries, agonism and a desire for *entre-soi* (French noun: literally, a situation where one keeps company with people who are socially and culturally similar to oneself). Keeping this in mind, and using data gathered over the last 30 years in the Quercy, I am discussing the central role played by the communal meal in community building, but also in the reinforcement of agonism between villagers and villages. I am paying special attention to the semiotics of the food eaten during these meals, sustained as it is by metagastronomic discourses that complement the meaning of these meals.

Keywords: semiotics of food; communal meals; metagastronomic discourse; solidarity; agonism; *entre-soi*; Quercy; France

0. Introduction

I am sitting with friends and other villagers around long communal tables set under the old plane trees on the village square. It is a balmy summer evening. As the sun sets in between the elegant old stone houses framing the square, every one is waiting for the communal village meal to begin. People are chatting, moving about, happy to see and

greet each other. The atmosphere is merry and light. About 200 people are gathered: the chatter fills up the square, drowned at times by the cars passing by. But shortly, as the food is brought to the tables, the chatter is replaced by the noise of cutlery and glasses, accompanied by comments on the food, on the weather, and more heated conversations on politics and life in general. The meal will last about 3 hours, during which local food items will be served, until the time that the villagers, sated with food and words, try their legs on the dance floor, or return home.

This will be only one of the feasts that grace the area of Quercy, South-West France, known as the Causse² de Gramat³; there, summer is epitomized by a succession of feasts in many of the villages. From the beginning of July to the end of August, village feasts take place almost every week-end: they last about two to three days (longer for the larger villages), and always culminate in a communal meal on the Monday night. The calendar of village feasts (called locally *fête votive*) is announced via the Tourist Bureau of Labastide-Murat, the biggish village that serves as the administrative center of La Communauté des Communes du Causse de Labastide-Murat, a semi-federation of 22 small villages located very close to each other.

Village feasts are portrayed by the tourist economy and the local journalists as pleasant and festive social events that offer patrons the possibilities to forget about one's life problems by partaking of the social activities and the meal. For instance, the feast, and specially the commensality developed during the communal meal, is said to ease tensions and to create new worlds: "By spending the evening and sharing one meal with one's compatriots, a new social world miraculously appears"⁴, wrote journalist Jean-Claude Bonnemère in his editorial of July 2nd 2015 in *La Vie Quercynoise*. He adds: "Social considerations are erased, and people's individual qualities are combined in the same effort, always with good humour. Whatever hierarchy there is only serves the organization of the feast"⁵ (Bonnemère 2015:2).

Though village feasts and their meals are certainly very pleasant and festive, measured by the excitement they generate and the large crowd they attract, and one of the prime social events of the summer season, and though they do depend on the good will and hard work of the volunteers of the organizing committees, social and political tensions associated with the feasts can be observed that belie the organizers' (and the tourist bureau's) claims that the feast is really only a harmonious social event.

As we shall see below, underlying tensions and social divisions are particularly obvious in the preparation and consumption of the communal meals, where features associated with community building coexist with mild rivalries and agonism.

At every step of the staging of the meal (preparation, discussion of intentions to participate or not, and consumption) villagers interact with different types of insiders: their neighbors, their friends, and other villagers they may or may not interact with on a regular basis. On a larger scale, they also interact with residents of other neighboring villages (who are both insiders and outsiders of a different kind), and with tourists (who are truly outsiders).

The ultimate background of the village feasts is that of a region suffering from increasing economic marginalization and impoverishment, now that its former small farm agriculture is almost defunct. The trend started in the 1970s. With an aging population, the livelihood of the region depends importantly on the social services provided by the state to its elderly citizens, and on tourism. In that depressed economic context, it is essential to the economic and social well-being of the villages that feasts, and their communal meals, succeed. Solidarity, *communitas*, agonism and *entre-soi*⁶ are central to the sociality of the meal, where intra- and inter-village tensions, doubled with insider/outsider tensions exist in interesting dialectics. Much of all this is revealed in gastronomic and metagastronomic discourses taking place about and during the meals.

Keeping this in mind, and in order to explore the dynamics marking the social life of the communal meals during village feasts⁷, I am developing my argument along three axes, that of solidarity (and its interplay with *communitas*), that of agonism, and lastly that of *entre-soi* and belonging. I am discussing the central role played by the meal (and its transformation through time) in the building of *communitas* and thereby reinforcement of social structure within the villages, but also in the reinforcement of agonism and solidarity within and between villages. Using a semiotic framework that combines an attention to the meaning of food and an attention to how people speak about food, the paper analyses these tensions as they can be deciphered in the various phases of the meals. I argue that if solidarity within and between villages is essential to the success of the village meals, agonism is the side-kick that stimulates the staging of the meals.

1. Solidarity (and *Communitas*), Agonism and *entre-soi*

Inevitably, any reference to solidarity is likely to conjure up Durkheim's (2007) distinction between mechanic and organic solidarity. I am not interested in revisiting this dichotomy or its shortcomings (structural and socio-evolutionist). Rather, I am more interested in thinking of solidarity as a social process that is essentially intersubjective in nature and which, like *communitas*, surfaces at various moments in the life of social groups. Solidarity appears, as I show here, in fleeting moments of heightened consciousness that one belongs to a social or a cultural group. As explained by Thijssen (2012:456), solidarity is linked to politics of recognition of the other that are often agonistic but also intersubjective. Villagers showing solidarity with other villagers at the time of the feasts do

so because the gentle agonism that exists between the villages allows for the projection of sameness and difference on the background of economic marginalization.

For my purpose, the interesting dimension of solidarity lies in its experiential or spontaneous dimension. As with *communitas*, solidarity is expressed during moments of sociality when the transient expression of togetherness becomes manifest⁸. I argue that the heightened consciousness that feeds solidarity, and also *communitas* (E. Turner 2012; V. Turner 1995), resides in one's perception of one's place in that group, though others in the group may not share the same consciousness. During the village feasts, from the moment of the organization to the consumption of the meals, ambient communal vibes, but also moments of communal obligations, distress, emotions or competitions, lend themselves to the experience of solidarity and *communitas*.

I further argue that solidarity is also relational. It functions in tandem with agonism and *entre-soi*, within the background of what people may experience or verbalize as shared values. Solidarity, and in some cases *communitas*, I add, is revealed at times in relation to *entre-soi* and mild agonism, a type of respectful rivalry and conflict that exists outside of any form of antagonism. For my purpose and building on Mouffe's (2010) analysis of agonism in democracy, I propose that mild political conflicts, or rivalries, exhibited by inter-village or intra-village politics on the Causse du Quercy bring about potential positive effects of collaboration, emulation and solidarity during village feasts that lead to their reproduction. This is most obvious when rivals⁹ in the world of feast giving must negotiate rather mundane but crucial features of feasts such as timetables, menus and over all size of the event to ensure that a suitably large crowd will attend the feast. It might be argued that agonism may heighten the risk that the village feasts in Quercy might fail or even collapse. I will show that in that geographical area of France affected by depressed demographics and economics, solidarity, *entre-soi* and agonism interact to ensure that they do not.

The tensions between solidarity, *entre-soi* and agonism that I am articulating in this paper are best revealed by the gastronomic and metagastronomic discourses used by the villagers with whom I worked. Language, as we know, "makes" events. In places like France, where food occupies a central place in sociality and where conversations about food, and commentaries on food, are akin to a cultural obsession, language "makes" food. Speaking about the meal while producing, organizing and consuming food literally makes the meal. I am arguing that metagastronomic discourse does more than reveal the food ideologies that govern people's understanding of the meaning of food and of themselves in social relations. It contributes to the constitution and reproduction of these ideologies and all the while, "makes" food. Analyzing metagastronomic speech events

allows the analyst to peel away at the meaning of food through language: what food is; what it does; what it signifies.

In the meals I am analyzing here, this discourse reveals and captures a preoccupation for an *entre-soi* that is reminiscent of what Michael Herzfeld (2005) has called “cultural intimacy” in other contexts. More recently, Sylvie Tissot (2014)¹⁰ explained that the *entre-soi* has many facets (social reproduction through the enactment of private activities, exclusivity, and resistance) but she insists on the fact that the *entre-soi* is also a discourse on the place that the others occupy in one’s social space. This take on the *entre-soi* opens the door for an understanding of communal meals that resonates quite well with Mary Douglas’ (1972) analysis of the degree of separations associated with the sharing of food: the symbolic value of food and of meals is such that one does not eat typically with just anyone. Eating outside or eating inside the home indexes the level of proximity that links the diners, she claims. Sharing food, as the word commensality indicates, but also words such as French “*compagnon*” (and its variant “*copain*”) puts the emphasis on the link that remains once the food is consumed. By sharing food, an *entre-soi* is created that goes beyond the act of eating together: it is an act of social reproduction. Eating food together constructs social links, a phenomenon well understood by anthropologists since Malinowski studied feasts in the Trobriand Islands. Yet, during feasts, where the usual habitus of food consumption are typically suspended, people do just that: they share food with strangers. And in the process they place the strangers in their own social relations, if only for a short time, while identifying them as potential trading or marriage partners.

Maurice Bloch (1999) argued that commensality, the act of sharing food together, is one of the most important operators of the social process. During these meals one observes that food consumption and “commensality evoke a [...] dialectical process of unification and diversification” (Bloch 1999:138). Back to Douglas (1972): Eating food together unites, but also separates. The inner workings of communal meals in Quercy reveal that they offer avenues to unity, but that they also index and reproduce inner social divisions and transformations. These are marked by seating arrangements, but they are also marked by food choices that act as communication. Language and food are related: When people make food choices, or when they use food as language to impart additional meaning to commensality. These choices act as metagastronomic comments on the food events and on what frames them. But comments on food can be metagastronomic as well when they reveal the underlying ideology or positioning that frames the food event and the people in (or outside) this event.

2. A brief sketch of village feasts

As in any other parts of the southern regions of France gathered under the old regional name of Occitanie, the village feasts of the Causse de Gramat are known locally as “*la fête*”

*votive*¹¹ or “*fête patronale*”. The name finds its origin in *la votà*¹² (Occitan word meaning “votive feast”), i.e. the feast in honor of the patron saint of the church of the village (Sol 1929). The *votà* provided villagers with an opportunity for merriment, and in the days when motorized transport did not exist, it provided people with opportunities to meet.

Over the years, village feasts have changed. From low-key festive events organized by and for the villagers, and in which all of them actively participated, they have become social spectacles organized by a few members of the village, with the rest playing the role of observers and participants (see also Champagne 1977; Fabre 1996; Saur 1992). Some changes are more obvious than others. First, many feasts are votive in name only¹³ (see also Saur and Blaya 1994). Few make direct or indirect reference to the patron saint of the village, while, at times, a mass is listed on the program of a feast. Second, the feasts now all take place in the summer and not necessarily on the feast day of the patron saint of the village. The economic reasons are clear: A feast held in the summer is likely to attract a greater number of patrons: tourists, locals and returnees (people originating from the village but living and working away from it) will join forces to socialize and revel on warm summer nights, and will be expected to spend money.

Whether they are called “votive” or not, the purpose of today’s feasts is multiple: offer a forum during which the village can come together; offer an opportunity for merriment; allow the village to present itself to others and to derive prestige from it; and generate income for the municipality and for the *comité des fêtes*. Unlike many a feast described ethnographically (see Dietler and Hayden 2001), there is no formal presentation of food that guests exchange and go home with (as in Melanesian feasts, for instance). There is no formal competition among villagers and between villages either, though as will be shown later, covert competition for prestige and capital gain exists behind the scene. Yet the collective consumption of culturally marked foods¹⁴ in public clearly makes these events feast-like, and so do their ritual dimensions (the music, the dancing, the speeches, the communal consumption of food and drink) that as Dietler (2001) shows, clearly sets feasts apart from ordinary meetings and meals. And though the outsider may not notice the political nature of the village feasts, the insiders observe political networks at work with mayors, councilors and other officials congregating around the bar, working the crowd or opting to sit at the same table during the communal meal. The feasts are indeed important release activities, but they are also highly charged symbolic and political events.

Finally, the economic dimension of the feast is increasingly present in the equation because they are expensive to stage. Organizing committees try to plan events and activities that will be profitable. The communal meals are the most important of them: in that context, we should not be surprised that the selection of the menu is crucial to the success of the event: an appealing menu at a good price is likely to attract large crowds.

This is crucial because to ensure their existence from one year to the next, feasts need to be well attended. They must succeed. But size matters also on the political level. As will be seen in the rest of the paper, size ties in with the mild rivalry that exists between villages. This is so because the success of a feast is measured by the number of people partaking in the communal meal. In other words, more diners means more money for the *comité des fêtes*, and greater prestige for the village. Both are essential to the future of feasts.

3. The transformation of communal meals

The *votà* provided family members living away from the village with a reason to gather and rekindle family ties. As Fabre (1996:59) noted, along with wedding and funerals, the *votà* was, and still is, one of the main moments in the year when members of the extended family would be invited. In earlier times, up to the 1970s, families gathered and socialized around the *votà* meal. These meals were intimate affairs reserved for the family insiders, though close friends may have been invited. The emphasis was on the reconstruction of kin ties and *entre-soi* around a festive meal large enough to feed a family, and “rich” enough to stand out as an extraordinary meal.

Typically, the *votà* family meals had to include meat, a costly product that was eaten irregularly by villagers at ordinary meals. When served during the *votà*, meat spoke of abundance and merriment, and indexed that meal as a special event. As Sol (1929) explained, the *votà* meal was one of the best meals of the year. Records show that in the 19th and 20th centuries in the Quercy, such meals included typically *la poule au pot* (a hen cooked in a broth with vegetables, which we will describe later on) or a *hochepot*, a meat stew called locally a *mourtaïrol* and made of beef, chicken and ham cooked in broth, oftentimes with chestnuts and turnips and flavoured and coloured with saffron (Sol 1929:60).

In today's *votà* in Quercy, the communal meal held on the village square has displaced the family meal as the main food event of the feast. Family meals do take place during the *votà*, but their *raison d'être* has to do more so with the gathering of families during the summer vacations than with the *votà* itself¹⁵. The communal meal is a relative novelty that, according to local interlocutors, developed at the beginning of the 1970s. Over the 40 years¹⁶ that I have participated in the feasts in Quercy, I saw the communal meal appear, spread quickly throughout the area, and get transformed. While it was possible for Saur to write in 1992 that the dance was the principal attraction of the village festival, at least for the outsiders (1992: 09; see also Bourdieu 2002, Champagne 1977 and Fabre 1996), the communal meal is now the central point of the feasts on the Causse. It acts as a metonym for the festival.

Communal meals come in two formats, each making room for participants and organizers in different ways. The sit down dinner, which I call here *repas villageois*, is the earlier form. Though light in spirit and truly festive the meal is a bit formal. The *repas villageois* usually associates one emblematic dish, all involving the valued meat component, with one particular village. The menu is the same, from one year to the next, and becomes in some ways, the signature dish of a village: *la poule farcie* in Vergès; lamb chops in Canedac; *mique*¹⁷ at Licou, etc. No village would consider “stealing” other villages’ signature meat dish: doing so would challenge the gentle harmony predicated on measured agonism. It would truly be bad form and might actually backfire. In these meals, a set menu is dished out at the table in a sequence of dishes, French style, by members of the *comité des fêtes*. Diners sit down and typically do not leave their seats for the duration of the meal.

This type of meal contrasts with a more recent form called the *repas fermier* (farmers’ meal). Organized by local food producers who each present their food on a stall, already plated, the *repas fermier* takes the form of a food fair in which many of the typical dishes of the region are available. This meal format makes it possible for diners to move around the square in search of the next course on their menu. There is no set menu, but rather a diversity of offerings. Patrons come and go throughout the meal, select their favorite food from their favorite vendor, and socialize actively. As we will see below, both forms are very popular. The table below presents the contrasts between the two forms.

<i>repas villageois</i>	<i>Repas fermier</i>
sit down dinner	Get up and get food
One set menu (emblematic dish)	Food fair: selection of typical local dishes
Prepared and served by organizing committee	Prepared and plated by producers
Set sequence of dishes	No set sequence of dishes

The producers involved in the *repas fermier* call themselves the *producteurs du pays* (producers from the area). They know that in the matter of food, language also matters (Lehrer 1991). Their choice of name is therefore not anodyne: it emphasizes the local and the terroir. The term *pays* which translates commonly into English as ‘country’ has additional meanings. Two are particularly relevant here. The first meaning refers to a region considered from the angle of identity. By calling themselves *du pays*, the producers signal themselves as insiders, as people who belong. The second meaning is now dated and regional; it refers to people originating from the same region, the same village, as in “*Charles est mon pays*” (Charles and I are from the same region). Used in that context, both meanings reinforce each other. They conjure up images of authenticity, identity and

locality that anchor the food they produce in the terroir (see also articles by Karrebaek and Lasater-Wille in this volume). Aware of the marketability of pays, and faithful to its meaning, les *producteurs du pays* only offer dishes recognized as local by the attendees, prepared with foodstuff they themselves produce or animals they raise. In keeping with the tradition of family feasts of yesteryear, meat is of paramount importance: roasted or confit duck breasts, potatoes sautéed in duck fat, duck sausage, *aligo* (potato purée mixed with fresh mountain cheese), lamb chop, *cabecou* (the local goat cheese), etc. are *de rigueur*. No one would dare serve anything else and vegetarians, as a friend remarked, have a hard time finding something to eat on the Causse during these feasts, and particularly in this display of meats. This display indexes the metagastronomic discursive value of meat.

By contrast with the *repas villageois*, the *repas fermier* has two advantages. For one, it allows diners to speak with a larger number of people whereas in the sit down meal format, one is pretty much stuck with the same neighbors all dinner long. If one goes to the meal to meet people, one wants to be able to see as many as possible. Second, diners can compose their own menu and eat only their preferred foodstuffs at a rhythm that suits them. Among contemporary eaters, used to and expecting food diversity (Jourdan & Poirier 2010), many relish the possibility of composing their meal, but also of tasting different foods. This freedom is important to them and partly explains the success of degustation menus in contemporary high-end restaurants. Diners also relish the freedom to move from one interlocutor to the next. In some ways, they are together, but they are free. Part of making the moment involves the ability to move about and speak to a larger group of people or to stay put and explore the same conversation further. While moving about the crowd to go fetch a dish, some diners seize the opportunity to greet friends and to chat with them. Others prefer to stay in their seat and ask someone to bring them food, so that they can continue their conversation. Again, the social dimension of food is not limited to eating together; it is reinforced by speaking together. The dynamic nature of the *repas fermier* formula increases the metagastronomic importance of language.

This new meal format is reminiscent of the social scene of the *alapurshet'i*¹⁸ type of dinner served in Georgian urban centers and analyzed by Tuite (2005). Setting up a contrast between the traditional sit down *supra* (formal banquet where everyone is sitting around the table and men give toasts in turn) where formality is reinforced by the *tamada* (the toast master who dictates the order and the rhythms of toasts) and the *alapurshet'i* cocktail type of dinner, where everyone stands up and moves about, Tuite speaks of freedom and of a food context that challenges the old food order of the *supra*, and where sociality is redefined by the individuals as the event progresses. Commenting on the same contrast, one of Manning's Georgian informants does not hesitate to lump the *alapurshet'i*

type of dinner with freedom and democracy and a new social order in Georgia (Manning 2012:169). On the Causse, the contrast between autocracy and democracy does not hold, of course; yet, one can see that the success of the new meal formula rests partly with freedom (of food choice and of movement)¹⁹ and partly with the fluidity and possibility of social encounters.

The *repas fermier* requires less work on the part of the organizing committee: the producers do all the work. One might wonder whether this new formula will put the *repas villageois* in jeopardy. I do not think so: though the two formats of meals I described engage different types of commensality and sociality, both are very popular. The *repas villageois* endures for two good reasons. First, it could be said that the *repas villageois* harks back to the old social order, and is in some ways reminiscent of the family meal that was held during the *votá*. Sitting around a large table in someone's house, people were served by the members of the host family. In that sense, the *repas villageois* reflects the ideal of "tradition", though it is not traditional. Second, though the *repas villageois* is more labour intensive, it brings in more money (about 8 euros per person instead of 2 euros brought in by the *repas fermier*). The *comité des fêtes* decides on which formula they will opt for in any given year.

4. Prepare with care

Preparing a feast and a *repas villageois* is taxing in terms of work and money required. Given the effort involved, members of the organizing committee often recruit villagers to help prepare the meal, set the tables and set up the tents under which people will be able to find refuge in case of a summer rainstorm. In the smallest villages such as Rovère, Vergès, Amergues and Licou (about 100 inhabitants), the preparation of the *repas villageois* is truly a collective affair and the division of labour is clear: the men set up the tables and the tents and carry the heavy material the women may need; the women are busy with the preparation of the meal. All volunteers are welcome and every one showing up is given a task. The atmosphere is busy, purposeful but pleasantly ludic as well. I recall helping out with the meal in a village about 10 years ago: the scene stays with me vividly. Under the firm hand of Mme Doumergue, the head of the organizing committee, women and young girls spent the morning peeling vegetables and making broth. Standing in the outdoors in front of long makeshift tables, wearing colorful straw hats against the sun and aprons against the dirt, the women peel away. They swap at the flies and the bees that circle their faces; they chatter about all and everything; much bantering is taking place. At some point, one hears some humming where the 80 year-old Marguerite stands. She sings an old folksong from the Quercy in Occitan, soon to be followed by the eldest women in the group. Sniggering at first, the youngest ones are now happy to be quiet and listen. Marguerite's beautiful mezzo voice makes *La pastoura als camps* (the shepherdess in the meadows) come alive: "*Quon lo pastouro s'en bo os camps, Gardo sèi moutou*

nadoï, tidera la la la la la” (“When the shepherdess goes to the meadows, to watch over her sheep, tidera la la la la”). I truly felt the moment of unison and *communitas*: all these hands working, all these ears listening, the minds wandering, the hot sun bearing down on us, the smell of the vegetables, the bubbling of the broth; Marguerite’s voice giving rhythm to the moment. In that particular instant, time was suspended. Peace and pleasure took over and pushed in the background the hard work lying ahead of them and whatever work related tensions may have existed earlier among these women. I could see this on the relaxed faces of the women working across the table in front of me. All told that day, about 30 people in a village of about 100, worked from morning to evening to ensure that the food would be ready at 8PM for 450 diners to enjoy.

The planning and the preparation of the feast is a site where community surfaces, is manifest and is enacted, and where *communitas* is experienced. But it is also the site, *entre-soi* notwithstanding, where the fractures inherent to the social groups are revealed. Members of the *comité des fêtes* make decisions on menus, festivities, and timetable, and implement them without consulting members of the village in which it is taking place. In any given year, it is their vision of what the feast must be, and of what the feast must do, that is enacted. Frictions or covert tensions among villagers often ensue. Nothing deeply personal is at stake, really, except the need to express one’s position, to have it acknowledged. Over the years I have seen villagers refuse to help with the organization of feasts, or partake in the activities of the feasts, simply because So-and-So is in charge of the *comité des fêtes* that year, or because the theme of the feast is not to their liking. Such attitudes, though rare, are potentially risky: if whole factions were to pull out, for political or personal reasons, the feast would be in jeopardy. It never happened, as far as I know, but people are aware of the risks. The costs to the village, in terms of reputation and economy, would be too high.

Another type of tension appears: villages compete with each other but also invite each other in. The feast is, as Saur and Blaya (1994) make it clear, an opportunity for the villages to present themselves to the outside world and to welcome it in their midst. It is also an opportunity to impress the outside world, as well as the inside world, while making money. Expenses should meet the budget, yet one needs to put up a good show. Thus, throughout the summer, villages compete for revelers and advertise the feast energetically. Posters are pasted in shops and in strategic spots around the villages; flyers are distributed in mailboxes and during various public events; programs are printed and left with the tourist bureau. The members of the organizing committees are very aware that “tradition” sells and that tourists, mainly urbanites or foreigners, appreciate events that celebrate local rural life. They prepare publicity blitzes particularly aimed at them, showcasing the activities that speak of tradition: games of *rampeau*²⁰, folkloric dances, recounting of old local stories, local food and dishes, etc. These “traditional” elements are

not very old, actually, and many go back only a century or so, the period immediately before WWI serving as the benchmark for tradition and thus as the source of inspiration for this tradition. But tradition and locality often go hand in hand and therefore, not surprisingly, the emphasis is also on the “local”, defined here in term of rusticity, focusing on simple dishes and excellent products (see Bergues 2014:53).

In her study of village festivals in the Marquesas, Riley (2013) shows how local food is instrumentalized to reinforce the sense of place and identity in an otherwise very globalized day-to-day foodscape. Her analysis applies here as well. The taste of place as Trubek (2008) puts it, and I argue, the place of taste, matters much in this celebration of French locality. “The production of locality through taste,” says Trubek, “helps constitute the meaning of France in the midst of the global flow of ideas, ingredients and values shaping our taste for food and drink” (2008:53). And nowhere is it more obvious than in the foodstuffs served during the meal. No sushis or nouvelle cuisine, here. The emphasis in most villages²¹ is on the products of the terroir, i.e. foodstuffs produced locally by small-scale producers according to what is believed to be an ancestral recipe and cooked as people imagined they have always been cooked. This is truly language through food, as Riley and Cavanaugh (this volume) explain.

Scholars of tourism have shown that tourists consider “locality” as the primordial quality of a great vacation trip with food being singled out as the conduit through which locality (and authenticity) can be experienced sensorially (Boniface 2001; Everett 2008). Tourists in the Quercy are no exception: Indeed, some of them told me that locality and terroir are an added value to their vacation. Both contribute to the change of esthetic and experiential scenery that many of them look for when they come to such a remote, sedate, and rural area of France. But locality and tradition are also valuable to many locals; they cannot be separated from such systems of representation. And though villagers do not need to be reminded of them through publicity, some do object when and if the dishes selected or the activities advertised look “wrong”.

5. Going to the meal, or not

Many of my local interlocutors consider the feast as the social event they must attend in the summer. Not only because of the entertainment value provided, and it is true that a village meal is a truly pleasant affair, but just as importantly to show solidarity with the organizers (if the feast is in one’s village), to signify one’s membership in the society of the village, and to reciprocate the visit from outsiders (if the feast takes place in another village). Upon chance meetings, many villagers will ask each other whether they are planning to go to the feast taking place that week...or have they already organized something with friends.

Thus an innocuous question such as the one Michel asked me: “*Est-ce que tu vas à la fête à Vergès?*” (“Are you going to the festival at Vergès?”), really meant: “Are you going to the meal at the festival at Vergès?” And the subtext was “and if yes, may I sit with you?”²². Though the second part of the question is not formulated, all interlocutors know it is part of the conversation: one does not go to the meal alone, and once there, one does not sit by oneself for dinner. Mary Douglas (1972) is right: Even in a crowd, one does not dine alone, i.e. away from one’s social network. Asking one about sitting with them is a delicate affair, and answering such a question is just as tricky. Michel does not want to intrude in case I am part of a group already constituted (and he does not want to be told so). And I might not want to spend the evening in his company. He does not want to reveal that he finds himself alone, either because he planned poorly, or because no one thought of including him. In either case, Michel is hoping, without telling me, that I will invite him to join our group, or to create a group with him. Despite all the good feelings that permeate the meals, in filigree lay the potential social divisions between villagers. I will come back to these in the next section.

Villagers go to the communal meals on the Causse with various motives in mind, ranging from gourmandise to needing a fun night out, or wishing to see friends. Though more self-serving, these motives will get people together just the same. Mme Roumégouse, a 75-year-old resident of Labastide-Murat, exemplifies the villager who attends a feast for pleasure and not for social obligation. She declared that she went to the feast in Vergès only to eat *la poule farcie*. She likes that dish very much and affirms with authority that the *poule farcie* served in Vergès really respects the traditional recipe. “Actually, it is very good”²³, she claims. To show the significance of eating the meal in Vergès, she adds: “You know, this is expensive”²⁴. Therefore, I only go to two feasts a year: that of Labastide-Murat because this is where I live, and that of Vergès in order to eat the stuffed hen”²⁵. Besides she lives alone: one is not likely to cook a stuffed hen for oneself, she adds.

The stuffed hen in Vergès is served in that village year after year; it is quite popular and every year, the meal is very well attended. Not only because the food tastes good, but also because the dish itself is layered with different meanings. People are quick to single out *la poule farcie*, or *la poule au pot* (hen in a pot), as one of the most emblematic dishes of France as well. Recall that it was one of the dishes served during family *votàs* in the 19th century. Julia Csergo (1999) explains that it is, throughout French history, part of various food registers and endowed with different layers of meaning: a family dish, but also a dish of the simple people, specially among peasants; a dish served in times of abundance and during Sunday meals; a national dish, but also a dish of the terroir (understood here as the small local place, where tradition gives meaning to how food is produced, understood and consumed). When asked about the significance of that dish, many interlocutors pointed to what children are taught at school and thus reproduced the

gastronomic discourse they learned at school: It is the dish, now mythic, that Henri IV, king of Navarre and France (16th century), is said to have promised to all his subjects for their Sunday meals. It is thus illustrative of good times, and tradition as they see it. Here tradition, history, terroir are all indexical of how French food is constructed symbolically. The ideology of food thus transmitted by the school establishes a common plane of cultural understandings that associate past, present and future. By eating *la poule* collectively, the diners eat a bit of collective history and, in so doing, bring about *communitas*.

For villagers like Mme Roumégouse, going to the communal meal in Labastide-Murat, the village she lives in, is a moral imperative; she must support the efforts of the *comité des fêtes*, and she also must be part of the communal effort to make the feast a success. She also relishes the opportunity to socialize, as evidenced by the ease with which she speaks to one and all. And though she might not like the menu served that year in her village, she attends the meal nonetheless, in solidarity with her fellow villagers and to be with them. On the other hand, going to the feast in Vergès stems from other preoccupations; for her, gastronomic gratification is the prime mover. But so much the better if her participation does triple duty: honoring the history of French food and by the same token showing solidarity with people from Vergès, while also having fun.

Some of the villagers refuse to participate in the feasts or decide to stay on its margins, while some take the radical step of leaving the village for the duration of the feast. Reasons abound: too noisy, too expensive, too inauthentic. Others will only go to one event (the meal, in most cases) because that is, quite often, all they can afford, but also because this is where they are likely to see almost everyone. Yet, all know that the success of the feast does not rest only with the work of the organizers: it depends fully on the good will of the participants. For the reputation of the village to be preserved, whatever village tensions may exist need to be suspended for the duration of the feast. People will need to show up in order to participate in the display of social harmony. Absentees might be noted, and their absence commented upon.

Every one counts, particularly those who, like Mme Roumégouse, the potential attendee who likes the Vergès' chicken in the pot, can afford only two feasts a summer. Predictable menus are reassuring and contribute to the reinforcement of tradition as it is perceived and expected, and to the gastronomic comfort of the diners. When the menus change, people are unsettled and risks appear. An example of risk comes from Labastide-Murat for instance, where the communal meal called *le repas tricolore* and held the night preceding Bastille day, seems to have a different menu every year: *paella*; *poulet basquaise*; *jambon braisé*; *moules frites*. Monsieur Puech born, raised and living in the village, did not want to go to the *fête tricolore* because the *poulet basquaise*²⁶ announced on the flyer was, as he

said “not a local dish and probably prepared with hormone laden battery chickens that I do not eat because it is not good”²⁷. Monsieur Puech felt that the recipe (almost foreign though it originates from an area of France located barely 300 kms south of the Quercy) and the products (which he assumed had to be mass produced “otherwise how could the organizers provide 200 chickens for this dish”) were akin to an insult to the spirit and philosophy of the local feast as he saw it. His negative perception of the chosen dish is another metagastronomic way to critique the non-local and unfamiliar as undesirable. In his mind, the communal meal ought to celebrate the taste and identity of the place by selecting a menu showcasing local foodstuffs and local dishes. On the evening of the meal, he boycotted the meal and stayed home instead. Monsieur Puech’s vision of the village feasts is one anchored not so much in tradition (he does not mind the transformation of the fête votive of his village into a fun fair), but in the force of the local. For him, the local (and the terroir when it comes to food) is the frame of reference through which identity can be displayed and consumed, and meaning displayed. Local food serves as projection of identity for all to see, in a way that any thing hybrid cannot, and this despite the fact that the communal meal during which this food will be consumed is a “tradition” barely 40 years old. Writing about the place of food in festivals in the Marquesas, Riley (2013) shows how new traditions (those linked to colonization) mix with “older” traditions (the pre-colonial Marquesan ways) to create new foodscapes that are projections of people’s identities. Here Monsieur Puech, focusing his attention to the food and setting aside the relative novelty of the communal meal in village feasts, indicates that food is symbolically deeper than the context in which it is eaten.

6. Being at the meal and speaking it

True to the description given by Bonnemère (2015) at the beginning of this article, diners come, sit and eat together, have a good time and through the sharing of the meal rebuild or rekindle the spirit of community and re-create the social life of the village. To the outsider, the group at dinner under the plane trees is a community having a good time eating a meal together. To the insider, the inner social working of the village appears clearly: people do not sit in a haphazard fashion, taking up any seats that are available. Some groups are obvious, from one feast to the next: the local professionals in different groups, the shop owners, the farmers, members of the same age-class, neighbors, members of the bridge club, various elected officials from different villages, etc. People want to sit with friends, and not with just anyone. And though there is no high table, and social distinctions are not marked symbolically, nowhere is it more obvious that sharing a meal marks out the social workings of class, even in a collective meal of this type. “*On ne va pas à table avec n’importe qui*”, Patrick told me (“One does not sit at table with just any one”). As my husband and I are planning to go to the village communal meal this year again, we have started to think about who we should sit with and who we should invite to sit with us. We are both insiders and outsiders and know very many people with whom we

are on very good terms; the choice is therefore vast. Yet, we do not live in the village all year long, and thus do not truly belong in some social circles: we are not part of the notables, we are not part of the elected bodies, we do not have old school friends, we do not run shops, we are not part of the local charitable organization, etc. So whom should we invite? We will invite our friends, who are mostly like us socially and who, like us, are both insiders and outsiders.

A closer look at the sitting arrangements reveals that these might be planned in advance. And indeed they are. As soon as the tables are set up by the members of the organizing committee, a designated member of any such group will go to the village square early, sometimes driving to the next door village if the feast takes place there. They will choose the best available spot (away from the road, under the trees, away from the sound system), and with a large felt pen, will mark out the number of spaces needed (measured by the necessary number of seats) for their group. They carve out that space with big lines, as if borders, and write their own name in the center of the defined space, thus claiming it. The gesture is binding: I have never seen or heard of any one striking out a name from a table and writing their own name instead. This would be truly bad form. As dinnertime approaches, the tables are covered with such lines and with names of “claims”. One can see people perambulate among the tables, reading aloud the names as they move from one table to the next, and at last finding the one they need, signal their relief with a sigh: “*Ah! C’est là!*” (“Ah, there it is”). They will not be alone for dinner, lost in a sea of people they do not know, or do not wish to know; nor will they sit unwillingly next to people they know, but do not wish to speak with. Here, when *communitas* surfaces, it is not a masquerade, but it lives along social divisions.

The meal is on²⁸. In the outdoors on the village square of Labastide-Murat, under the old plane trees that have become a feature of many a village square in southern France, large tables covered with white paper have been set up. Sitting very tightly, people are served, one course at a time, by the members of the *comité des fêtes*, men and women. The division of labour that prevailed during the preparations of the feasts and of the meal is gone. A live band might play some music and a master of ceremony might be entertaining the crowds and keeping things moving. Dishes arrive in the required order, carried on large trays by volunteers: the first course, the main course, the salad, the cheese and the dessert. This is the very structure of a French meal²⁹. Food is dished out directly in the guests’ plates, one at a time, thus giving the diners time to make comments on the smells and appearance of the food. The communal dimension of the meal is signaled and reinforced by the fact that everyone eats the same thing at the same time, and in the same order, served from the same dish. These three elements speak truly to the etymology of companionship, that is sharing bread together. The volunteers serving the succession of dishes are in control of the pace of the meal.

The villagers play guests to the members of the *comité des fêtes* who organized the meal, who in turn play hosts to them. But all play hosts to the outsiders, that is to people from other villages and vacationers who attend the event. At an opportune time, the mayor of the village might get up and go around the tables, greet every one, making them welcome, shaking hands with men, and kissing women and children, even those who did not vote for him. It is a time for unity, not for division. The village and the villagers are in a merry mood and truly want to enjoy the evening. It is important that a good time be had by all. *Communitas* is carefully constructed.

Ubiquitous in all these meals is the *foie gras*, the southwestern delicacy made with the liver of force-fed ducks, and the emblematic dish of this part of France. Here, *foie gras* is served because it is local, of course, but also because people truly like it. Its status as a luxury item elsewhere probably increases the importance of serving it in this context. But the *foie gras* also serves as an anchor of identity and becomes the pretext for cultural and nationalist positionings. Every year, without fail, I hear comments similar to the one made by Philippe about “these Americans who are banning *foie gras* under the pretense that the ducks suffer. Are we looking into how their chickens are raised? And their pigs that live in cages. And their cows that never see a field?!”³⁰ (Philippe, August 2015). Because of its standing as a luxury item elsewhere, the *foie gras* is the ideal conduit for pride and cultural posturing and, I would add, prejudice. And though many diners often cook it themselves at home, locals expect that it will be served with their meal on that occasion. Here again, metagastronomic comments that use food to talk about something else, like Philippe’s comments, signal identity politics and underpin the inside/outsider tensions that challenge cultural intimacy. In these moments, the exclusionary dimension of the *entre-soi*, as explained by Tissot (2014), resurfaces and nurtures solidarity.

Heated conversations at times develop around the respective merits of the duck *magret* (duck breast) from the village of Licou or that from the village of Cadillac; or of the efforts of M. Poujade to cook and mix the best and fluffier *aligo* in the whole area. Thus doing, diners have opportunities to display their taste or knowledge of the products. As others such as Serres (1985) and Sutton (2001) have remarked, eating is not only the work of the mouth but also the work of memory: it feeds the stomach and feeds the minds. During French meals, Michel Serres (1985:247) explains, the tongue does double duty: it tastes and it speaks. But talk about food does additional work: it feeds social relationships in a way that simply partaking of the same meal does not. In France as a rule, talk is part of food eaten among peers: there cannot be a good meal without conversation, or rather a good conversation over a meal is just as important as the meal itself. Eating without speaking is not done and makes no sense. Topics such as politics or religion are often taboo, for fear that heated arguments would arise and break the harmony of the meal, but even there, most diners would not budge in front of such quarrels. Oftentimes, these

conversations center on past dinners and memorable food (Saint-Paul 1997) with patrons jokingly remarking that “*ça y est, on est encore entrain de parler de nourriture en mangeant*” (“Here we go, we are again speaking about food while eating”). It is important for diners to comment on the food one is eating, and when appropriate, to compliment the cook. I see comments on food, taste, and meals as metagastronomic speech events that allow diners to assess their commensals and place them in the world. But if words make the moment, they also make the food. They situate this particular meal, and its various ingredients, in the social and individual foodscapes in a way that is truly illocutionary. When Olivier says that he likes the buttery silkiness of the *foie gras* from the Rossignol farm as an appetizer, or when Marie-Thérèse describes the spicy flavor of the duck sausage and its magical pairing with Mr. Poujade’s *aligo*, while Ginette claims to be jaded by yet more *foie gras* and announces that she will skip that part of the meal, they do more than simply explain and justify the choice they make. They construct the meal by comparing it to other meals. They explain the gustatory logic that guides their food choice. They speak to their food experience in that event and by the same token establish their own legitimacy in the event, while creating a frame (inference of previous participation in the event, and the experience they have acquired) in which they can be situated, and known. They also speak of the *terroir* and their knowledge of it – i.e. of how place is defined in relation to its products and the taste of its products³¹. Doing so they perform the event, as Austin (1962) would put it. They affirm their status as insiders, as “of the place”. And though, as Manning explains (2012:22), place can have “an important role in consumption without requiring that place have taste”, I argue that it is the close association of place, taste and words that these diners make that gives added meaning to the meal they consume. All this contributes to the poetics and esthetics of the meal. It constructs the meal socially by giving it cultural rooting while rendering salient the participants’ knowledge of this rooting.

7. The *entre-soi*

Given the economic and social importance of the meal, the gentle agonism that exists between villages during the year escalates in the summer. The organizing committees, under pressure to ensure that the feast will be well attended, tend to sell more and more meal tickets each year. The village meals have become so popular that in some cases the number of diners is 4 fold that of the local population. For instance, the small village of Vergès, with a population of 117, draws every year about 450 diners who wish to eat *la poule farcie* (the stuffed hen). The “*producteur du pays*” meal in the feast of Amergues, a village of 126 inhabitants, drew 750 people in August 2015. The small village of Licou (part of Labastide-Murat) drew about 600 people for its most traditional meal *la mique* at the end of August 2014. Over the years, the number of patrons at these meals seems to be going up, while the competition (though never formally mentioned) between villages is heating up.. Villages, and their *comité des fêtes*, seem determined to outdo each other in

a kind of friendly agonism evidenced by the efforts put in devising the programs of the feast and in the amount of publicity. All this is seen in a positive light. In some respects, this rivalry reminds the observer of the competitive feasting we find in other parts of the world. Writing about competitive feasting in Papua New Guinea, Pierre Lemonnier (1990) observes that the increment between the feasts organized by different groups is not necessary. For the competition to exist, competition that he analyses as essential to local forms of leadership and to the reputation on which leadership is based, one is only required to do as well, and not necessary to do more. On the Causse, a completely different social scene, where leadership is organized differently but where reputation is just as important to the municipal administration and the *comité des fêtes* as it can be to a Papua New Guinea Big Man, the economics of the feast are the prime mover. They drive the desire to have even more patrons than the previous year. A successful feast reflects well on the administration of the village and insures that there will be enough profit to stage a feast the following year. To be deemed successful, it is as if the crowd at dinner must be bigger every year and one's village meal must be larger than that of the next village. Patrons comment on the size of the crowd and the numbers of attendees. The mayor of one of the villages was beaming when he confided in me this past summer how pleased he was that they had been able to sell more meal tickets than expected. On the Causse, it seems, the size of the meals must increase because of economic necessity and gentle agonism.

Lately, however, the inflation of numbers has provoked some backlash, with local people complaining that the meals attract too many people and that the atmosphere is ruined. "*Il y a trop de monde à Licou et c'est plus pareil. L'atmosphère a changé*" ("There are too many people at the Licou feast, and it is not the same anymore. The atmosphere is different"), Amélie told me. When I asked her what she meant by atmosphere, she listed a few elements: people who know each other; eating outdoors under the plane trees; eating special food. Others like her are complaining about the presence of too many outsiders ("*trop de monde qui vient d'ailleurs*" – "too many people who come from elsewhere") and lamenting the loss of the *entre-soi* ("*on ne se connaît plus*" – "we do not know each other"). The *entre-soi* was always an important aspect of the feasts: on the last night of the feast, after the outsiders had left, villagers enjoyed the time with their neighbors, during the dance, or around a drink (Champagne 1977; Saur 1992). When I asked who were these people who came from elsewhere, Amélie eluded my question and smiled instead. I took her discretion as a sign that the topic was touchy: outsiders are welcome so that the feast is an economic and social success, but there should not be too many of them for fear that the *entre-soi* will be disrupted. The presence of outsiders "should not feel like an intrusion in the collective space" (Herzfeld 2005:x). This need for the *entre-soi*, akin to Herzfeld's concept of cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005), but on a smaller scale, is central to the feasts and to the meals. The carving out of dining spaces at the communal

tables illustrates the importance of the *entre-soi*. It provides insiders with the basis for shared sociality.

Yet, the same *entre-soi* creates a tension between the desire to be part of a collective defined locally (the village), and the desire to be part of larger collective units: the Causse, Occitanie, France. Villagers' loyalties are torn. And though Saur's observation that reciprocity and exchange among villagers and between villages is still recognized as morally binding (Saur 1992), locals feel that much is lost, when under the pressure of numbers (and success), the organizing committee accepts, and cultivates, yet more diners. In this instance, it is as if agonism leads to success which in turns leads to a desire for more *entre-soi* and *communitas*.

Reactions against large numbers have appeared. In 2016, for the first time, the large green posters advertising the feast of Licou made no mention of the communal meal, the traditional *mique*. Surprised, I enquired at the tourist bureau as to whether there would be a meal that year. "Oh yes", said the young lady at the desk *sotto voce*, bending towards me and speaking as if we were conspirators, "but they are not announcing it because last year there were too many people. If you want to sign up for the meal, phone Mme Vigouroux"³². It was all very hush-hush.

8. Rumination and digestion

In the last forty years, the feasts on the Causse underwent much transformation. From religious celebrations that provided opportunities for merriment and large family meals, they are now purely secular events featuring large communal meals, some of which have turned more recently into *repas fermier*. While tourists, whose participation is essential to the economics of the feast, are happy to join in, it is the participation and appreciation of the locals that is the true measure of the success of the feast. Many of the Quercynois, as Saur remarks also (1992), follow these feasts throughout the summer, out of a sense of obligation, solidarity or habit. But it is true that their desire for particular dishes or particular kinds of commensality encourage them to attend the meals. The exchange and reciprocity that tie villages during the feast season are essential to sociality on the Causse, rooted as it is in the ties of friendship and kinship that link people to other villages. This sociality comes to the fore in various moments of the year.

The spirit of solidarity I describe in this paper surfaces to consciousness, if only fleetingly, at certain moments in the village life, and at particular moments in the preparation and consumption of the meal. A division of labour of sorts surfaces: in turn, each village and the villagers in them, play hosts and guests to the whole of the Causse. During the festival of meals that gives rhythm to the summer, the whole Causse rather than the village becomes the community of reference. Commensality, mutual obligations, reciprocity, and

cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 2005) are important ingredients of the solidarity that guarantees that the feasts are successful. Community building and agonism feed solidarity. As Vered Amit points out (2002), communities exist as an idea or a quality of sociality. Here, the community emerges in “the mobilization of social relations” (Amit 2002:10) in the village, and between the villages. And, as with all communities, the affinities, but also the differences, frictions and tensions among villagers and between villages are more salient at times when social relations are mobilized. The village feasts and the communal meals are such an occasion. I concur with Saur and Blaya (1994:48), who stress that the feast does not exist in vacuum: it exists within sets of relationships that preexist it and make it possible.

One wonders why communal meals have become such an important feature of the feast. What lies beyond the pleasure procured by dining *al fresco* in a warm summer night under the majestic plane trees of a beautiful tiny village of Southern France? What does it mean to partake of delicious food with friends and family in such a setting? What is achieved? Partial answers are found in the difficult economic circumstances and rapid social change prevailing locally since the 1980s. The feast and the meal become significant economic activities that bring in a bit of money for the villages in an area that is economically depressed. Retrenchment of state support stimulates agonism between villages, but it also stimulates the solidarity necessary to the success of all feasts. Feasts are part of the social fabric of the area but also enable its existence. Therefore, when one feast fails and can no longer be staged³³, either because it is not attractive enough to patrons, or because the aging villagers do not have the energy to stage it any more, a sense of failure and gloom descends on the whole area. The meals and the village feasts reassure villagers that they exist as a group and that they are doing well.

The collective meals can also be seen as an extension of the family *votà* of yesteryear. As social networks develop and transform, the family members are not any longer the only protagonists of the *votà* meals. Sitting with friends, families, colleagues, diners share food with people they like or who are socially similar. But more importantly, the festive communal meal, with all its joyous chatter and banter, is the place where social reproduction takes place, though in a ludic, informal, light, and ritualized way. It is the locus of revelation and reconstruction of social differences and resemblances within the village. It is the result of a mix of collaboration and competition, friendship and rivalry, community and agonism among insiders, and between the insiders and the outsiders, each having a role to play in this display of solidarity.

Finally, the meal is the place where participants are sorted out. For the duration of the meal, the outsiders become insiders only to be excluded again when the meal is over, and when the *entre-soi* regains its rights. A yearning for a return to the *entre-soi* explains the

secrecy surrounding the communal meal in Licou, for instance, as it was explained to me later although organizers also explain that staging a meal for a very large number of people is taxing³⁴. But these outsiders are not a homogeneous group. They include people as diverse as tourists who will not come again; foreigners and French citizens who fell in love with the region years ago, now call it home and pride themselves in being integrated; vacationers who own a house in the area that they occupy only during the summer holidays; children of “natives” who live elsewhere but return to the village to spend time with their parents for the summer holidays; grandchildren who spend their school holidays with their grand-parents, etc. All entertain with the region their own sets of relationships based on different degrees of proximity and distance with local peoples and their network. In light of this complexity, it was difficult for Suzanne to define for me the elusive *entre-soi*, and even more difficult to explain the basis on which one could be brought in on the secret meal of the Licou feast. Words such as *famille*, *participation à la vie du village*, *résidents de longue date* (family, involvement in the village, long term residents) seemed important to her. In other words, people with whom some history was shared. Outsiders did not meet that criterion, and though their presence at the meal is genuinely embraced (they are needed for the meal to be a success and they bring a cosmopolitan flair), there are other times when cultural intimacy is preferred. The dialectics between solidarity, agonism and *entre-soi*, all manifested in the metagastronomic discourse that runs through the meals, allow for the different levels of belonging and diverse ways of being insiders and outsiders to be identified and sorted out.

Endnotes

(1) I am grateful to the editors of this volume for their guidance, and particularly to Kate Riley. Suggestions made by the anonymous reviewer were equally useful. I thank Pierre Lemonnier, Dennis Murphy, Dominique Saur and Kevin Tuite, all familiar with the scenes I analyze here, for their suggestions, comments and questions, and their attention to details and interpretation. ↩

(2) French geographical term; a very eroded karstic plateau typical of the Western and South-western parts of the Massif Central. ↩

(3) Except for Gramat and Labastide-Murat, all place names and people's names are aliases. ↩

(4) French original : “En bavardant avec ses compatriotes tout au long du repas et de la soirée, comme par enchantement c’est un monde nouveau qui est en train de naître” (Bonnemère 2015, 2). ↩

(5) French original: “Les considérations sociales s’effacent et se conjuguent les qualités de chacun, dans un même élan, toujours empreint de bonne humeur” (Bonnemère: 2015:2). ↩

(6) French noun: literally, a situation in which one keeps company with people who are socially and culturally similar to oneself. ↩

(7) Though enriched with observations gathered every summer in the last 40 years, systematic research for this paper was carried out in the summers of 2015 and 2016. In addition to interviews with villagers on the feast, its evolution and their opinion/participation in it, the data consist in extensive participant observation data during 15 feasts over 2 summers. ↩

(8) I am aware of Esposito's (2010) philosophical analysis of *communitas* as debt and obligation, but do not find it useful for my purpose here. ↩

(9) Called adversaries in the theory of political agonism articulated by Chantal Mouffe (2010). ↩

(10) In her introductory chapter to a special issue of *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, Tissot (2014) develops the concept of *entre-soi*. ↩

(11) As less and less people speak Occitan, or go to church, they do not recognize the root *votà* behind the word *votive* and often offer interesting explanations of the meaning of the term. For instance, Dominique Saur recounts that upon hearing the term *fête votive* for the first time, a young man asked what it was. His interlocutor retorted that it was the feast held in the locality where one votes (*la fête de l'endroit où tu votes*) (D. Saur, private communication, Cahors, September 3rd 2015). Obviously, the semantic field of the elections (*vote*) seems to provide a reasonable etymology that cuts across generations: an elderly interlocutor, not resident in the area, asked me in August 2015 why these feasts were called *votive* when no one was voting that day. ↩

(12) In his article “ ‘Faire la jeunesse’ au village”, Daniel Fabre (1996) explains that in 1960, the word *voto* was used throughout the province of Languedoc to refer to the village feasts. (I am grateful to Pierre Lemonnier for pointing this article out to me). ↩

(13) That further changes are taking place, and that local conceptions about the status of the feasts are in flux, is exemplified by the publicity flyers announcing the feast of Labastide-Murat in August 2015. The main flyer referred to it as a *fête foraine* (fun fair) which it now is, what with its merry-go-rounds and attractions invading the village square for four days, while the vouchers one had to purchase for the communal meal called it a *fête votive*. ↩

(14) These are food items produced locally and associated with the local foodscape; they include foie gras, duck confit and duck sausage, purée of potato and fresh cheese called *aligo*, chicken in the pot), etc. ↩

(15) It should be noted that many people coming back to the village for summer holidays choose to do so at the time when the *votà* is held. ↵

(16) Every summer, I stay for a few months in one of these villages where my family lives. I currently carry out ethnographic and historical research on the social and economic transformations of this village. I am an insider of sorts, though I live in Montreal, Canada, the rest of the year. ↵

(17) Leavened dough made with eggs and duck grease and cooked in a broth of salted pork and vegetables, with which the cooked dough is eaten. ↵

(18) Derived from the French phrase *À la fourchette* (with a fork) (Tuite 2005). ↵

(19) Some would say this new dining style indexes the idealization of individual choice associated with neo-liberalism. ↵

(20) A game of skittles typical of South-West France. ↵

(21) In the last couple of years, the *comité des fêtes* of the big village of Labastide-Murat, has been experimenting with different menus such as paella, mussels and French fries, or Chicken à la Basque. I heard positive and negative comments on these experiments, from villagers and visitors alike. ↵

(22) I am a regular resident of Labastide-Murat during the summer months and Michel is from Aiglefin, a neighboring village. We have been friends for years and at times were part of the same group of friends who organized to go to the meals together. ↵

(23) “D’ailleurs, elle est très bonne.” ↵

(24) These meals cost between 16 and 20 euros each or about 18 to 22 US dollars. ↵

(25) “Vous comprenez, cela coûte quelque chose. Alors je ne vais qu’à deux fêtes dans l’année: Labastide-Murat, parce que j’y habite; et Vergès pour manger la poule.” ↵

(26) Recipe originating from the Pays Basque. The chicken is cut up, and sautéed with onions, green and red peppers, tomatoes, garlic and white wine. ↵

(27) French original: “pas un plat local et en plus, c’est sûrement des poulets aux hormones élevés en cage et ça, j’en mange pas parce que c’est pas bon.” ↵

(28) The description that follows is the rendering of a composite (rather than specifically observed) meal. ↵

(29) Mary Douglas' (1972) "Deciphering a meal" explains that eating is patterned and presents different types of structures according to types of meals. That is true also of the French meals. But as Poulain (2001) has shown, the structure of French meals is changing: fewer courses, less rigid ordering of courses, either cheese or dessert, etc. But in formal dinners, or meals served during feasts of the like I am analyzing, this structure remains. ↵

(30) "Les américains qui interdisent le foie gras sous prétexte que les canards souffrent. Est-ce qu'on se mèle de voir comment leurs poulets sont élevés? Et leurs porcs en cage? Et leurs vaches qui ne voient jamais un champ?" ↵

(31) For a discussion of the link between place, heritage tourism and taste in the Auvergne, see West 2014. ↵

(32) "Oh, oui, mais on ne l'annonce pas parce que l'an dernier, il y a eu trop de monde. Si vous voulez vous inscrire, il faut téléphoner à Mme Vigouroux." ↵

(33) The municipality of Rovere announced that they would not be staging their feast this year for lack of labour force in this aging small village of 87 inhabitants. ↵

(34) In 2017, the village of Licou decided to limit the number of meals served to a maximum of 400 and to give preference to inhabitants of the commune (Licou is part of Labastide-Murat) and their guests. To reach this goal, the *comité des fêtes* sent private invitations by mail to the residents of the commune. ↵

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