

# Labeling Authenticity, or, How I Almost Got Srrested in an Italian Supermarket

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the labeling and signage of heritage food in northern Italy, which are built through the semiotic and political economic construction of authenticity and tradition. For the small- and medium-sized producers with whom I do linguistic anthropological and ethnographic research, signaling the small-scale, hands-on, artisanal, and traditional nature of their production is as essential to giving their goods value as high quality foods as are any of the material qualities of the foods themselves. Simultaneously, the circulatory possibilities of late capitalism and representational regimes such as intellectual property shape the economic value of authenticity. This renders signs of manuality, time (i.e., tradition), and place (i.e., locality) available as well to larger-scale producers whose food-making strategies may be highly mechanized and industrial in nature, but who can afford to disseminate, profit from, and protect these signs in their own packaging and labeling. In considering signage and labels in this light, this paper illuminates a paradox: that those who produce ‘authentic’ heritage foods may be the least-well positioned to profit from them within late capitalist food systems.

**Keywords:** manuality, heritage food, Italy, authenticity, qualisign

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“We disagree on the value of things  
and the relations of things, but we agree on the value of a label.”

– Edward Sapir, *Culture, Genuine and Spurious*

The labels seemed to be everywhere, and I just couldn't resist. I was in an Italian supermarket, shopping for the week, and the packaging for various salamis, prosciuttos and other cured meats kept catching my eye. So many of them featured what looked like handwriting: cursive writing for the name of a product or slightly irregularly shaped lettering in product descriptions, many on a plain background, white or tan or brown, evoking butcher paper. This being a supermarket, not a specialty shop, most of these products (and their labels) were industrially made by large-scale companies whose production techniques are largely mechanized. Handwritten(-looking) labels, then, for foods that had probably barely been touched by hands. The incongruity was striking.

So I whipped out my phone and took some photos,<sup>1</sup> thinking to compare them later with the myriad other photos I'd taken of signs and labels at farmers' markets and elsewhere during the course of my research on heritage foods in northern Italy.<sup>2</sup>

The security guard who tracked me down soon afterward demanded to know if I was the *signora* who had been taking pictures in the deli section. He was aggravated and asked me why I'd taken them, and didn't I know that I wasn't supposed to do that? I pled ignorance and said I had simply been interested in them. He scowled and told me not to do it again, or he'd have to escort me from the store. Personally chastened, I agreed. Ethnographically piqued, I recognized an informative instance of rule violation: sometimes you don't even know there is a (social) rule until you break it.

What type of rule was this? Clearly I had trod into the fuzzy area of intellectual property protection (see Dent 2016); those products and their labels were mine to buy, but not mine to photograph, at least not within the confines of that supermarket (for the record, I've photographed plenty of foods and their labels and packaging in the privacy of my own home with no objections). No one had or has ever objected when I was photographing products or signs in other contexts, with or without explicit permission. In Italy, events that happen in the public sphere are legally recordable without explicit permission of participants, though as an anthropologist I try to be as explicit and communicative as possible with those whom I audio-record or photograph, whatever the context. Goods that circulate through supermarkets seemed to have different types of protections than those in farmers' markets, although both types of goods may draw on the same set of signs (in the semiotic sense) to populate their labels and signage (in the marketing sense). Handwriting, or the appearance of having been handwritten, seemed to be one such sign,

a particularly charged one that signals a series of complex contradictions about cultural heritage and authenticity and their signification and valuation.

## The paradoxes of authenticity and its signs

All the food makers who are the subject of my ethnographic and linguistic anthropological research are engaged in the contradictory practice of selling heritage as a *qualia*, or “conventionalized quality” (Gal 2013), specifically via its instantiation in heritage foods. Heritage food, that is, food valued for its extensive links to particular places and their histories depends heavily on being “authentic”—that is, displaying the right set of signs that signal these links to consumers as well as to pertinent government officials and regulators.

There are a couple of essential paradoxes in the contemporary production of authentic foods as heritage. First: heritage is supposed to be something that belongs to a particular group of people due to their shared history, and as such is not alienable or commodifiable. But, of course, elements of heritage are bought and sold all the time, whether as food, as part of heritage tourism (Collins 2015, Heller et al 2013), or in the form of religious or ritual objects or artifacts that may circulate to the highest bidder.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is precisely the particular qualities that make foods make sense as heritage foods—they need to have been hand-made, and made according to long-standing local histories of production that pre-date industrial food making—which in turn now offer added value for such foods as commodities within a more or less global marketplace (Pratt 2007). One way that the producers with whom I work negotiate this contradiction is to demonstrate that they have warrant to sell these goods because they are the right type of person and embody these histories of production: they are from this place, often have family histories of production, raise their own animals, make their products in small batches and by hand, using techniques passed down to them, etc. Because they themselves are part of this history, those who buy their products may also participate in this cultural tradition through consuming these goods and the *qualia* of heritage they embody, thus contributing to the maintenance of this heritage.

The second paradox is that heritage foods, as ‘authentic’ representations of a particular place, group of people, and their histories of production and consumption, must per force be ‘the same thing.’ What makes a giant wheel of Parmigiano Reggiano count as such is that each one is produced in exactly the same way. To make heritage foods is to make exactly the same food that every other producer of that food makes, according to how this product has historically been made. But these goods, of course, also circulate within the capitalist market, competing with other goods for consumers’ attention. Thus, producers of heritage foods must figure out ways to distinguish their products from others that are nearly identical, constructing distinction within a tightly constrained set of possible

variations.<sup>4</sup> The qualia of heritage comes into play here, too, as producers create and abide by a semiotics of authenticity and heritage, a semiotics that includes qualities of the goods themselves, as well as how they are packaged, labeled, and otherwise represented. The latter is where producers may distinguish themselves against others who produce “the same thing,” even as the set of representational resources with which to do so is as constrained as the material techniques they use to produce these foods are.

In this piece, I focus on both the semiotics of heritage food and its complex economic valuations, and how these two are intertwined. To do so, I lay out and analyze this semiotics of heritage and authenticity, focusing on how bodily practices and notions of time and place become signified in labels and signs. Signaling the small-scale, hands-on, artisanal nature of their production is as essential to the financial success of the producers with whom I work as are any of the material qualities of the foods themselves, like taste, smell, size, or texture. But differences in scale and the workings of the late capitalist marketplace produce another tension: once the signs that point to the production of authentic foods become systematized through their use by small-scale food-makers, they become available for use by other producers, including those working at industrial scales. What then counts as ‘the real thing’ and how to signify it and profit by it becomes a site of inequality, for not all products and their representations have the same protections nor types of access to modes of circulation that more regularly afford financial success (such as via supermarket chains).

In what follows, first I’ll lay out some ways in which authenticity gets constructed, largely through signs of manual labor. Then I’ll map how heritage is built on a foundation of authenticity elaborated with chronotopic bundlings of time and place, offering examples of smaller and larger-scale production for each. Then I’ll turn to some institutions that help structure this chronotope as well as underpin how it articulates with the market, and conclude by asking what is at stake when heritage becomes a commodified sign and a signifying commodity.

## **Signs of authenticity**

First, let’s focus on labels and various types of marketing signage, both of which are material linguistic objects that act as indexes—signs, in the semiotic sense, that point toward the objects they represent through a number of semiotic means. Spatio-temporal contiguity is key to this indexing: labels may be attached to or next to items in a food display, they may encase a group of the products, they may hang above or lean against food containers, or they may stick up out of baskets that hold foods. The physical or material features of signage itself can help to contribute to a product’s authenticity of course as well. For heritage foods, qualities that point to small-scale, non-industrial (aka

“traditional”) production often function as signs of authenticity. Consider, for instance, the hand-written signs that one of my producers used that you can see in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Donatella’s stand at the farmers’ market (author 2013).**

These signs, which also showed evidence of extensive use and wear, pointed to the unsophisticated nature of this producer’s, whom I call Donatella, production and marketing strategies, seeming to say “we are so small-scale and non-industrial, that we do everything—even write our signs out—by hand.” Their well-worn condition might also seem to indicate that the producer’s energy and attention is focused elsewhere, probably on making the salamis themselves. The manuality evident in these signs—they index the hand that wrote them—points to the hand-made nature of her products. For those who know this producer well, these signs also point to the difficulties of remaining organized when one is a very small-scale producer who depends on the labor of her two not-always-responsible sons. As she told me when I asked her about them, this producer made these signs one day when she got to a market to sell her goods and found that someone had failed to repack the new, nicer signs she had created earlier that week. This anecdote, whether one knows it or not, reinforced the authenticity of the signs—and thus of the products with which they are associated—due to the on-the-spot, rushed nature of their production, reflected in their slight irregularities in handwriting, size and shape, Peircean qualisigns that point to extremely small-scale production and hand-made products. These were precisely the qualisigns that caught my eye in the supermarket: fonts that mimicked handwriting (not print), evoking manuality and small-scale production.

A month or so after I took these photos and we had this conversation, this producer's teenage daughter typed up and printed out new signs, which she then laminated herself. The new ones still looked hand-made (the lamination was slightly irregular), but not so charmingly unsophisticated, and definitely more modern, with sans serif fonts that looked clean and machine produced (see Murphy 2017 on the semiotics of fonts), not handwritten at all. It's striking that I don't have a close-up photo of these newly minted signs, showing how the anthropologist—as much as any customer at farmers' markets like the ones where this producer sells her goods and makes her living—may be attracted to qualisigns of authenticity like these.



**Figure 2. “The Specialties.” Handwriting in the supermarket (author 2013).**

In contrast, consider the handwriting on the sign in Figure 2. This photograph, which I took in a different supermarket than the one where I got in trouble, depicts a display of D.O.P. salamis from Piacenza, the cardboard container of which has “*le Specialità*”—the Specialties—splashed across it. This Italian phrase, which echoes of specialty shops and specially prepared dishes, referentially sets these salamis apart from others that may surround it, which are (presumably) not special. The font in which this phrase is printed recalls handwriting, with its slant and the slightly irregular spacing between and sizing of the letters—compare the ‘a’s especially, and the ‘e’ and the ‘c’, the swoop of the S and scoop of the C. Compare this phrase moreover with the clearly printed label below it, and the qualisign of handwriting is all the more clear.

What I'd like to point out is that these types of signs can be used by producers at all scales to signify values of authenticity, pointing to non-industrial production techniques, small-scale production, and continuity in production strategies, even when these may or may not exist. Manuality, which characterizes small-scale, artisanal food production, is replicated in hand-written signs, which are icons (in the Peircean sense of representing through resemblance) of small-scale, authentic production. For small-scale producers, the same hands, or set of hands, may produce hand-made salamis or cheeses AND hand-written signs, creating in addition an indexical relation of spatio-temporal contiguity for the signs, the hands, the foods. This may be an intentional marketing effort or may simply arise out of the busy pace of managing a small business. But handwriting is available as a qualisign of authenticity, via this shared manuality. For large-scale producers, signs or labels may then also display this qualisign to signal authenticity for their products as well, whether there were any actual hands involved in their production or not. For these corporate producers, the signs of handwriting may signal a material relation that is missing.

## Place, time, and authenticity

So manuality may signal small-scale, artisanal production. But heritage foods, in order to be truly authentic, must also be bound to particular places and their histories of production and consumption. As such they are densely chronotopic. Bakhtin defined chronotopes as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships” (1981: 84). Speakers may construct chronotopes through their use of slang terms or quotation of Shakespeare, interdiscursively connecting contexts to create particular types of continuities or disjunctures, based on culturally-relevant and contextually-specific images of what a group shares—or does not—across time and space (Silverstein 2005:6, see also Dick 2010, Stasch 2011). Bakhtin maintained that “every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished through the gates of the chronotope” (1981: 258), and stressed that while chronotopes have meaning, they also have value, are evaluatable. Linguistic anthropologists have shown that the interdiscursive construction of chronotopes across contexts results in the preservation as well as transformation of their meanings and values (Agha & Wortham 2005, Briggs & Baumann 1992, Cavanaugh & Shankar 2014, Silverstein & Urban 1996). The chronotope of heritage, as it is deployed in the signs and labels I discuss here, *means* that the products they are attached to or point to come from a particular place, were made in particular ways, but also acts to give them *market value* through these very signs.

First, place, which is of central importance in constructing heritage. In Italy, it's very rare that you see a salami that has no markers of its provenance—where it came from, who made it, according to which traditional regional norms. When you do, it is often priced to sell, as were the salamis you see in Figure 3.



**Figure 3. The Salami from Nowhere (author 2013).**

This salami, which I encountered at a large open-air market in Bergamo (not a farmers' market), cost roughly half what specialty salamis usually cost in the supermarket and a third of Donatella's (17.50E per kilo).<sup>5</sup> Markets such as this one are common across Italy, and feature a range of products, from shoes and clothes, to kitchenware and food. The foods found at this type of market are not generally being sold by their producers, unlike at farmers' markets, where direct interaction between producers and customers is assumed and often operates as a big draw for customers (see Cavanaugh 2016 and Weiss 2016 on this dynamic at farmers' markets). This salami's sign may be handwritten and slightly worn, but those are the only signifiers of authenticity present, and here may remind us that 'hand-made' doesn't necessarily always translate into high quality. Even the context of this type of market does nothing to render this salami as connected to any particular producer or place of origin. The salami from nowhere, then, carries no links to place or a particular history or tradition, and its appeal is solely its low price. More commonly, salami and other processed meats—what are generally grouped together as *salumi* in Italian—are labeled as coming from a particular place (see Figure 4). Even *salumi* like the ones shown in Figure 4 that you get in the supermarket, which have been made by large-scale producers under industrial conditions, as is true for those shown here, nearly always have some connection to place on their label. Connections to a place like Parma, which is well-known for its prosciutto and other high quality *salumi* also give it prestige, as a tradition of quality is implied through association with that place. Bergamasco salami, although it lacks this association with a prestigious tradition of production, is recognized as a particular type of salami, and often labeled as such, joining place and tradition in a

name and thus reflecting the desirable image of a chronotope of heritage, or authentic continuity of production over time.



**Figure 4. Emplaced *salumi* (author 2013).**

More specific places, such as a specific farm (or “*azienda agricola*”), may also be displayed as a way to anchor products in particular places. Indeed, shoppers at farmers’ markets and other direct retail contexts may specifically ask the vendor/producer, “*dove siete?*” ‘where are you (plural) [located]?’ Signs like the ones shown in Figure 5, which I photographed at an open-air market that included a small number of local small-scale food makers, do this work of locating foods. The text describes the producer as an “*azienda agricola*” (farm, lit. agricultural company), gives the proprietor’s name (Silvano Alberti), states that the products are made by this very person (“*produzione propria*”), and that the farm is located in (probably outside of) Leffe, a town in the Seriana Valley (*Val Seriana*), in the mountains north of Bergamo. The sign also contains photographs of the barns (“*la stalla*”) and the alpine meadows (“*l’alpeggio*”) where Signor Alberti’s animals live and are fed, as well as photographs of some of these very animals, his products during their production (salamis curing, cheeses aging), and various people who are presumably involved in this production as caring for this many animals and making this wide range of products would require more labor than Signor Alberti could supply on his own.



**Figure 5. Signs of particular places (author 2013).**

This sign then renders these foods extremely emplaced and knowable, that is, offering a visual and textual window onto the temporality of their making, both attributes of heritage and authenticity. These cheeses and salamis were made in this place, from animals raised in these ways, with the hands of this person/people. These photographs work together with the handwritten phrases to signify the qualisigns of manuality and emplacedness, both essential to creating authenticity for these foods and endowing them with the chronotope of heritage. My use of emplacedness here is meant to conjure place, but also to point to emplacing as a temporal, historical process, demonstrating the denseness of time-space fusion that Bakhtin and others have demonstrated characterizes chronotopes.

Sometimes the specific location is not named in a sign or label, but a more general rural, pastoral location is represented through photographs or other representational means. In figure 6, we see photographs of a barn and its bovine inhabitants, which were displayed by a vendor selling cheeses at a food fair in the northern Italian town of Brescia I attended in February 2013. Here being located within a recognizably rural setting emplaces the foods being sold, and creates authenticity for these products. Martha Karrebæk & Marie Maegaard (2017) document a similar dynamic in their piece in this special issue of *Semiotic Review*, where photographs of pigs point directly to the pork that the restaurant serves.



**Figure 6. Cows at home (author 2013).**

Whereas the salami from nowhere must stand on its own merits, made appealing through its relatively low price (with its plain handwritten sign perhaps signaling low quality), the *salumi* from Parma may draw on the value of the famous and prestigious meat-curing traditions of that place. Signor Alberti's products are emplaced through the visual and textual representations of where and how they are produced. The photographs of cows at home in their barns next to cheese produced from cow's milk create an indexical association between the cows pictured and the cows whose milk presumably went into making the very cheese on sale that day. Representations like these of the emplaced nature of food production are qualisigns of authenticity, which may work together with other qualisigns that signal small-scale production—like handwriting, or photographs of cows grazing in mountain meadows, or even the participation of food makers in farmers' markets or a festival like the one in Brescia that explicitly promotes high quality, traditional, small-scale foods—to add market value to these foods, allowing producers to double or even triple the prices they ask for what may be very similar material goods.

To solidly bring heritage as well as authenticity into the picture, however, we need time as well as place. The chronotopic connections that help produce food as heritage connect contemporary foods and producers with an idealized past in which these authentic foods were produced in the right ways: by hand, on a small-scale, and often for distribution only among family and friends. Constructing continuity across historical time—connecting

'now' to a particular and valued 'then'—is a semiotic imperative in the producing of heritage foods. Producers, for instance, often describe their products as having the tastes of the past, as we see in Figure 7, directly likening what they do now to what was done in the past.



**Figure 7. The True Tastes of the Past: “I Veri Sapori di Una Volta!!!” (author 2013).**

This sign, which I photographed at the same open-air market which Signor Alberti frequented, offers a complex representation of heritage food and what makes it valuable, based both on constructing connections to the past, but also grounding these products in the contemporary moment. In addition to the information about where, what, and who is involved in making these cheeses (you can see the name of the producer and the name and address of the *azienda agricola*), you can see the phrase “*I veri sapori di una volta!!!*” (The true flavors of long ago [lit. ‘of one time’]). These foods, then, carry the real flavors of the past, but an idealized past as the phrase “*di una volta*” is the opening phrase for most fairy tales and refers to an unspecified past, a ‘once upon a time’. Accompanied by pictures of some of their animals, alpine meadows, and barns, this phrase connects the food at hand to foods made in the past, perhaps in the very same place, using the same techniques.

The label for the cheese on the right complicates this claim a bit, however: “*formaggio di capra—basso colesterolo*” (goat[’s milk] cheese—low cholesterol) attests to how *this* cheese may appeal to modern tastes and bodies, concerned less with consuming enough

calories (which would have been a preoccupation in the past in Bergamo, which was historically quite poor) and more with modern ideas of health. Goats, as well, have a very shallow history of being raised in Bergamo (cows and sheep have been much more common), and hence goat's milk cheese is a relatively new Bergamasco product. More traditional would be the square cheeses just to the left of the sign, which are *stracchino* (strachì in Bergamasco), similar to Taleggio, a D.O.P. (*Denominazione d'Origine Protetta* or Protected Denomination of Origin) cheese produced in this area that this small-scale producer would not be able to afford to produce (I'll discuss D.O.P. designations below). Indeed, heritage itself is a contemporary concern, and though the explicit focus of this chronotope seems pointed at the past, this past's connections to and reimaginings within the present, are equally important—hands working in the past, for example, must be linked to those doing so in the present. Such desires for the past emerge from the present, arising out of global capitalist conditions that shape and amplify the market value of authenticity and heritage (Cavanaugh & Shankar 2014).

Time and place, then, must be bound up together in the labeling of heritage food. The chronotope of heritage connects modern tastes and desires to the practices and goods of a particular place and its past, a space-time fusion that adds value to the goods that can embody its qualisigns.

## **Institutionalizing the chronotope of heritage food**

In all of the examples offered so far, I have considered signs and labels as functioning within the particular contexts where consumers encounter them. But in order to understand how the qualisigns of heritage and authenticity circulate across contexts and acquire market value in supermarkets and not just farmers' markets, we need to consider the multiple institutions, governmental and non-, which certify, systematize, and regulate these types of foods, and hence their labeling. For food producers in Italy, there are numerous institutional mechanisms for indicating where a product comes from, such as the European Union's D.O.P. (*Denominazione d'Origine Protetta* or Protected Denomination of Origin), used for foods, or D.O.C. (*Denominazione d'Origine Controllata* or Controlled Denomination of Origin), used for wines. Many Italian regions and provinces offer additional institutional means to link food with place and histories of production, sponsoring their own certification schemes that producers may join if their products fit the relevant requirements. These are often much less time and resource intensive than D.O.P. schemes, but also less-universally recognized and trusted. What all of these governmental schemas do, however, is offer the possibility of calibrating higher relative pricing (and thus potential profits) with food that is institutionally recognized as emplaced in a particular location and emerging from a specific history. It's worth remembering that this valuable chronotope of heritage is largely a product of institutional intervention, which is replicated across governmental and non-governmental spheres. European source designation

schemes as well as the Slow Food movement have certainly been instrumental in systematizing the production of heritage and shaping its value.<sup>6</sup>

Governmental food certification mechanisms such as D.O.P. require that producers work together in various ways, and align their efforts with other actors, specifically with officials and functionaries in the relevant government agencies. This involves creating a range of documents in common and extensive phone calls, meetings, and other face-to-face interaction. The first step that producers seeking a D.O.P. or the less onerous I.G.P. (*Indicazione Geografica Protetta*, or Protected Geographical Indication) designation must take is to establish a governing consortium (*consorzio*), a voluntary but binding organization.<sup>7</sup> A consortium is a legal entity with the ability to police its members and their products and impose fines or even expel members for breaking them. Consortium members can also be taken to court and punished by the state for extreme violations. In establishing this consortium, members must agree on a standard recipe and production process and establish supply lines with suitable farmers and butchers. After setting up the consortium, which basically makes the producers into a production team, members must formulate a proposal for their product to be considered for a D.O.P. or I.G.P. designation. Again, this will be done through extensive and repeated interactions, and will include proof of the historical roots of their food, demonstrating that this product has been made in this way, according to this recipe, in this place for an extended period of time (the longer the better). This proof often requires the participation of experts, such as food historians or other food producers, who vouch for certain types of products as being traditional—that is, having deep historical roots of production—and write up their findings for the consortium’s proposal.

The proposal, containing everything from historical accounts of the product to contemporary production procedures and pH balances, is then presented at a succession of governmental levels: first at the provincial level, then the region, then the national level.<sup>8</sup> At each level, in addition to governmental review of the documents, there is a public hearing at which protests from other parties—such as producers who feel that they’ve been left out of the process, for instance—may be lodged. These issues must be resolved before the proposal can be passed. If it passes at all these levels (which is far from assured), the consortium must then apply to their EU representative to take their proposal to the EU Parliament to be lobbied for and voted on.

Enlisting the help of local dignitaries and politicians is essential to this process at all levels, as representatives must be convinced that such a product is worth the effort they will expend in the legislative process. Such a process takes years, and requires the ongoing coordinated efforts of numerous actors, including producers, workers at governmental agencies, and these local political representatives. The success of such investments,

moreover, is far from assured, reflected in the number of Bergamasco products that are currently stalled at various levels for various reasons. Efforts to pursue an I.G.P. designation for salami, for instance, which included a salami festival and other events (see Cavanaugh 2007 for an account), have ground to a halt in the last few years due to disagreements among players at different points in the supply line: those who raise the pigs feel they should be included in the process, while those who make the salami don't want to be limited in their choices of either who raises the pigs or the slaughter houses they will use to those within the province—of which there are very few of both. Notwithstanding their current lack of success, these I.G.P. (and other) efforts center on and help to reinforce the centrality of temporal emplacedness as an essential quality of authenticity and heritage food.

Achieving these designations requires intensive investments of time and resources at great risk: such efforts may never be successful, and if they are, they may not yield the gain in market share—that calibration of heritage and high price—producers desire. Nonetheless, due to their inherent focus on where and how products are produced, source origin designations like D.O.P and I.G.P. are markers of authenticity, even when production levels are extremely high and production strategies become relatively industrialized. Such industrialization becomes essential for maintaining consistent quality across large-scale production: hands-on production techniques may be exchanged for predictable material characteristics in the foods. As of 2013, just five products accounted for 90% of D.O.P. products sold in Italy, including Gorgonzola, Prosciutto di Parma and Parmigiano Reggiano, all of which have large, thriving consortia.

Recall the *Salame Piacentino* D.O.P. discussed earlier. Notwithstanding the potentially high quality of the raw ingredients, adherence to a consortium-produced directive concerning ingredients and production methods, and connections to place that are evidenced in that label, the food's presence in a supermarket indicates a relatively large scale of production. Supermarket chains need to have predictable quality and quantities of the foods they carry. The Bergamasco producers who sell their goods in farmers' markets that I have discussed here would never be able to produce enough to supply one supermarket, much less a chain. And yet, both types of foods draw on the same set of available signifiers to lay claim to the value of heritage, and all their production is shaped by the governmental schemes that support this value, whether they can afford to participate in them or not.

There are also local, often less time and resource intensive, institutional means for designating the authentic origins of a product, which smaller-scale producers like Donatella can afford to participate in. In the early 1990s, the province of Bergamo set up an initiative called the *Città dei mille . . . sapori* (City of a Thousand . . . Tastes), the name of which plays off of Bergamo's historical role in allegedly sending a thousand troops to

fight alongside Garibaldi in the War to unite Italy in the 1860s. The *Città dei mille . . . saporì* is a self-selecting organization (producer may choose to apply to join, and may leave at will), which allows its participants to adopt its label as a mark of quality and evidence of their products as emplaced in Bergamo and its surrounding province. It is run by the Chamber of Commerce of the Province of Bergamo (*Camera di Commercio della Provincia di Bergamo*), which regulates the list of foods under its purview (which currently includes various cured meats, cheeses, polenta, and two kinds of sweets), reviews applications from producers to join it, and runs the inspection system that upholds the production standards that producers agree to when they become members. The *Città dei mille . . . saporì* initiative, while imperfect (inspections, for instance, happen only once every two years, and are said to be extremely superficial), has proven to be a valuable marketing tool for many producers, as the city’s Chamber of Commerce promotes these products by promoting them through its website as well as organizing booths at trade fairs and lending its sponsorship to local food-oriented events. Products with its now familiar label can be found in farmers’ markets, supermarkets, and restaurant menus across the province, as in Figure 8.



Figure 8. “Ol Salàm de la Bergamasca” – Official Bergamasco Salami (author 2013).

The label on the salami in Figure 8 (once again photographed by me in yet another supermarket) is dense in its representational components. There is the *Città dei mille . . . saporì* logo, a referential index, which connects this salami to this place that has this particular history. Embedded within the logo are additional elements: a cartoon rendering of the *Città Alta*, or Upper City, the prestigious city center of Bergamo, the image of which is an immediately recognizable—and highly prized—sign of the physical beauty of Bergamo. The *Città Alta* is resting on a wooden paddle that would be used to serve polenta, the food most associated with this area (Bergamascos and their neighbors are occasionally called “*polentoni*”, a slur that roughly means “polenta eaters”). Below the logo is the name of the product: “*Ol salàm de la Bergamasca*”, a phrase that means “the salami of the Bergamasco (province)” in Bergamasco, the local vernacular. Bergamasco, as with all of Italy’s many local languages, is an extremely potent symbolic resource for immediately indicating links to a particular place (Cavanaugh 2009). Due to longstanding, historical connections between people, languages, places, and local ways of life (often called *campanilismo* in Italy), vernaculars instantly associate speakers with places and their local histories, whether they are spoken, discerned in accents, or written on labels. Its presence here seems almost to overdetermine the authenticity of this salami as ‘real’ Bergamasco salami. The calligraphic font of this phrase hovers somewhere between handwriting and print, recalling, perhaps old-fashioned handwriting styles that favored serifs and wide-nibbed pens. These many qualisigns—of place, manuality, history, traditions of production and consumption—work together to produce authenticity and heritage for this salami. Indeed, when I encountered it, I reflected that it was the most authentic salami one could find in a supermarket, and outside of the face-to-face contexts (i.e. farmers’ markets) in which small-scale salami producers offer their goods.

But notice as well the words that appear without serifs, not emulating handwriting: “*controllato da organismo di certificazione EN 45011*” (controlled by certification body EN45011). EN45011 is an obligatory European Union standard regarding product quality. Its citation on the *Città dei mille...saporì* label hooks this product and others that bear its marker into systems of governmentality that are decidedly modern: heritage foods may sell (and for a high price), but they cannot do so without the say-so and support of various governmental entities that ensure that they are made according to contemporary food safety standards. Suffice it to say here that such standards require production techniques and contexts that are decidedly not those “*di una volta*,” calling for steel, tile, and mechanized refrigeration, for instance, where wood, ceramics, and aging cellars would once have been used.

While larger-scale companies often hire specialists to deal with these and other certifying requirements and documentation, it is expensive and challenging for small producers to successfully follow these standards and they frequently struggle. Donatella, for instance,

at one point let her membership in the *Città dei mille...sapori* initiative lapse, as she could not afford the relatively modest yearly fee. The certification mechanisms that recognize and protect heritage foods, exemplified perhaps most acutely by the foods made by the smallest scale producers like Donatella or Signor Alberti, establish a system whereby these producers are the worst positioned to profit by them and may struggle to make ends meet, much less abide by all the institutional requirements that would afford them and their products protection. Their hands-on production methods and face-to-face circulation patterns anchor this entire system of signification and evaluation, yet it is producers who operate at a much larger, industrial—and not hands-on scale—who can best succeed within it.

## **Circulating the chronotope of heritage**

As we have seen, heritage food producers in Bergamo demonstrate the authenticity of their products by creating linguistic and material connections between what was made in the past, in this place, and what they make now. These connections can take many forms and vary across the contexts in which goods circulate and are encountered by consumers. Some involve, indeed may require, interaction amongst differently positioned people within the exchange process (vendors and consumers; producers and wholesalers) as with the D.O.P. and other governmental source designation plans but also direct retail contexts such as farmers' markets, while some are material features that endure across contexts, such as labels.

Large-scale producers who use industrial production techniques can also utilize and profit from the chronotope of heritage through displaying qualisigns of authenticity and links to pasts and particular places, as you can see in this final image in Figure 9.



**Figure 9. Old-fashioned food truck at TuttoFood.**

At a Business-to-Business (B2B) food exhibition in Milano in May 2013 called *TuttoFood* (All Food), I observed this example of the past being recruited to promote authenticity. Fratelli Beretta is a large-scale industrial producer of *salumi*, which sells their products across Italy and Europe and exports to the U.S. I have not done face-to-face participant observation research with them, so can describe the company only in terms of what I saw that day at TuttoFood, what I have observed of their products in supermarkets, and their online presence. I had accompanied a much smaller producer to the exhibition that day, whose participation was heavily subsidized by the region of Lombardy. Fratelli Beretta's stand was enormous and located in the central area of the *salumi* section of the exhibition (as opposed to the producer I had come with, whose tiny stand was tucked away in a corner among the other producers sponsored by the region), representing a substantial expenditure on the company's part as well as attesting to the relatively large-scale of their company. The rest of the stand was all modern minimalism and clean lines: back-lit refrigerated cases filled with vacuum-packed sliced *salumi*, fashionably dressed sales people, and a pulsing dance soundtrack. In the midst of this stood this old fashion food truck, refurbished to shine like new and stocked with Fratelli Beretta products, but resounding of an Italian past, when ambulant merchants traveled from market to market in

trucks such as these—as some of them still do, albeit in updated versions. Fratelli Beretta's goods, then, are indexically linked to the past through their placement within this truck, itself placed within the very modern context of a B2B food exhibition. The past here is recruited via qualisigns of authenticity and heritage. It was no surprise to me to find that the company's website prominently boasts of it having been founded in 1812, and describes various moments across this 200+ year history, including its roots as the first butcher shop to open in the northern Italian town of Barzanò. This text is accompanied by a small reproduction of a very old-looking hand-written document, with swooping Italian-style cursive script on an irregularly-shaded brown background that recalls parchment or aged paper, representing the "*atto notarile*" (deed) that began this still-prosperous company. Handwriting once again signifies the value of authenticity, the manuality of those obviously ancient words evoking the manuality of butchering that occurred in that shop 200 years ago.

But I can't reproduce it here, as the website contains a page that discusses copyright, and states that, according to Italian Law 22.04.1941, n. 633 (*Legge sul Diritto di Autore*) no one is allowed to reproduce images from this site, without express permission of the company, which I don't have. It's beyond my scope here to explore these legal issues more in depth, though they are certainly part of a vital intertwining of capital, international intellectual property law, and fair use norms. Plus, I already got in trouble once for something like this.

My point, though, is that a large-scale company like this one and the supermarket in which I was scolded for taking photographs can afford to have protections that the smaller-scale companies like Donatella's with whom I do research cannot. I mean this in two senses: they literally could not afford to pay for the lawyers and other specialists who would construct and pursue such protections (they couldn't pay the security guards, so to speak). Nor could they afford to have such an elaborated website, or participate in the same promotional activities that Fratelli Beretta does. As I mentioned above, sometimes just the minimal requirement of adhering to *Città dei mille...sapori* initiative's dictates and affording its minimal fees are a challenge for Donatella and her peers.

But also, small-scale producers like Donatella, Signor Alberti and the producer whom I accompanied to TuttoFood that day could not afford to be as distanced from their goods as such protections entail. One of the key means through which small-scale heritage food producers achieve authenticity for their goods is through their co-presence with these goods—and the signs that accompany them. The physical presence of their body is part of how they demonstrate the small-scale, hands-on, hand-made, nature of their products. They can and do defend their products themselves, telling customers how they made this salami, or what their pigs eat, standing next to or behind signs that describe where they make these foods and show photographs of the landscapes and animals involved in this

production. Larger-scale companies recruit the labor of others, not only to produce their products, but also to produce the signs of authenticity and heritage that will accompany their goods to supermarkets and food exhibitions, as well as to protect both their foods and their representations in various ways.<sup>9</sup>

## Conclusion

As heritage foods, the salamis I've discussed here must be the same in many ways; as commodities, they must be made to stand out from other commodities in order to sell. Since their material qualities are so strictly delineated in order for them to count as 'the real thing,' emerging from an allegedly unchanging tradition, such distinction must be achieved semiotically, through qualisigns such as manuality and the creation and maintenance of the chronotope of heritage. The detachability of these signs within this late capitalist context, however, means that those who produce the most authentic food are often in the least advantageous position to profit from the signification of heritage.

Qualisigns of heritage need not adhere only to those products that would, by most definitions, be authentic—that is, are produced on a small scale, entirely or primarily by hand, according to techniques that developed out of the environmental conditions and cultural practices of a particular place, and have been handed down over generations. The very fact that large-scale industrial producers, such as Fratelli Beretta and the other companies whose goods I photographed (and occasionally purchased) in supermarkets, also utilize markers of authenticity like handwriting on their labels or an old-fashioned food truck at a business expo means that small-scale producers must work all the harder to demonstrate that their products are instead the ones that are really authentic. This semiotics, which is underpinned by governmental organizations and regulations, has consequences for and helps to shape the markets these foods are produced for and circulate within. Indeed, it is small-scale producers' very inability to produce, promote, and protect their goods and the representations of those goods they create in the same way that large-scale companies can—the very fact that they are inalienable from their products, but also never have complete ownership of them through their status as heritage foods—that allows these representations to circulate out of their hands and become part of the protected intellectual property of large-scale companies.

Such a case demonstrates the essential interplay of meaning-making and value production, and the advantages gained by constructing analyses that focus on political economic structures and governmental contexts, as well as semiotic processes. The chronotope of heritage food links geographically-anchored past and present production, a process that depends on governmental actors, institutions and regulations, but also participates in a regime of value that favors large-scale production over artisanal activities, though it seems to be premised on doing exactly the opposite. We may, as Sapir

observed in the epigraph I began with, agree on the value of a label, but such an agreement may have complicated and differentiated consequences for those who can afford to protect their labels (and products) and those who must work together with competitors to market their authentic items of heritage.

## Endnotes

1. This accounts for the relatively low quality of the photographs featured here. My apologies in advance. ↩
2. This ethnographic and linguistic anthropological research in and around the town and province of Bergamo occurred during periods of fieldwork during six months of continuous fieldwork in 2013, and shorter periods in 2005, 2007, 2010, and 2015, and was funded by the National Science Foundation (#BCS-1259752) and a Tow Research Professorship. ↩
3. See, for example, the controversy over the auctioning off of Hopi masks in Paris:  
<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-auction-masks-idUSKBN0OR1DG20150611> ↩
4. This complex contradiction between handmade and industrially produced was raised by Benjamin and applied to food by Barry Brummett in *Food as Communication, Communication as Food* (2011). ↩
5. 0.90 Euros per kilo is roughly \$3.37 per lb (exchange rates from Jan. 25, 2017). Compare to the 11.99 Euros for the Salame Piacentino DOP in figure 2 (\$5.85 per lb). ↩
6. See Grasseni 2017 on the complex influences the Slow Food movement and its certification schemes, including its Arc of Tastes, have had on heritage food in Bergamo and elsewhere in Italy. ↩
7. I.G.P. requires that only the final stages of production happen within a designated territory, rather than all stages, as with the D.O.P. ↩
8. Here is the documentation for Salame Brianza D.O.P., which is made just a few kilometers west of Bergamo: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32013R0872> ↩
9. I am deliberately simplifying ideas of scale here to sketch this point. There are numerous producers who fall between these two extremes, who draw on the same sets of signifiers as I have laid out here, in ways that are shaped by their relative size, specific histories, and goals particular to that company. ↩

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