Chapter 1

Towards a New Palate: Thinking Through Food in South Africa

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South Africa is home to diverse cultures, histories, food heritages, culinary landscapes, food-growing and food-buying environments that collectively spice the food eaten and enjoyed by individuals and groups in the country. Despite the significant issues of access for many, due to the well-documented class and buying-power differences among the country's people and between communities and issues of class and cultural affiliation in relation to taste, there is often considerable blurring, sharing, admixture and fusion among the country's foods (Anderson 2014; Balirano and Guzzo 2019; Civitello 2011). From *pap*[1] and *umqombothi*[2] to weekend *braais* (BBQ), vibrant curries and the varieties of *melktert* (milktart)*, pickled fish to koeksisters/koe'siestas,*[3] food is not only an essential sustenance, it is also a powerful tool for appreciating and critiquing South Africa's social and political complexity (Bodic 2021). One of the most important elements in South African food is its blatant heterogeneity: The foods and cuisines that different South Africans enjoy reach back to violent and tumultuous pasts of apartheid, migrant work, white settler domination and cultural hegemony, highly exploitative domestic labour and slavery. However, food growing, cooking, food choices and eating habits never only reflect histories of domination, pain, trauma and resistance, they also tell wide-ranging narratives of legacies of creativity, ingenuity, fortitude and joy. Therefore, the idea of an authentic South African cuisine or food (as if foods are ever "authentic" and untainted by hybridisation or globalisation) is a fallacy (Cheung and Wu 2013 who address similar debates regarding Chinese food). In addition, like the Africans transported to the United States (US) as slaves, different groups whose experiences of forced relocation, migration, slavery or economic exploitation in South Africa, obliged them to abandon and modify many foods and foodways they originally knew (Bower 2009; Wallach 2015). As the documentary film, *High on the*

1 Soft bread-like staple food made mainly with maize/corn meal.
2 African traditional beer.
3 The distinction between the two, one very sweet and associated with Afrikaner cuisine and a Dutch legacy, and the other spicy and flavoured by aniseed, cardamom and other spices, grew out of tastes brought over by Indonesian slaves.

Hog clearly illustrates, current cooking and food tastes in the US, often popularised as "American" by African Americans, have their roots in various African dishes, although they have since evolved due the sharing, admixture and fusion with other groups in the country as well as others globally.

In South Africa, what people can grow (if they have access to land), what they can buy (if they are not unemployed or have poor or no access to food markets) and what and how they cook, significantly influences their food choices. As discussed above, some of the main reasons can be linked to the country's history of the intense and far-reaching patterns of colonial settlement and apartheid domination, with forced migration, slavery and social dislocations of communities. Consequently, even a very brief reflection of how food has travelled and changed with people, how it has morphed as people migrate, interact, struggle or create, conveys how much it says about complex social and historical processes. The task for critical food studies, then, is not simply to add food to already-known histories, narratives or analyses of cultures, or politics of social process, but to provide a lens that allows one to think differently, in more nuanced ways and hopefully, think more productively about our world. Critical Food Studies, a relatively new field of academic study within South Africa, moves beyond understanding recipe development and the practice of culinary techniques. It is used instead to explore people's identities, different relationships between and among them, their cultures (Mintz and DuBois 2002) and the personal and collective politics that flavour our daily lives (Stanley, Lewis and Mafofo 2023).

What is Critical Food Studies?

This is usually the first question one is asked when claiming to work in the field of Critical Food Studies (Ashley et al. 2004; Belasco 2008; Miller and Deutsch 2009). First, the asking of the question is itself intriguing, since in many ways the meaning is self-evident: it involves a critical and usually interdisciplinary approach to the multiple relationships between eating, preparing, meaning making around ritualising or producing food on one hand, and human experiences on the other. These experiences are underpinned by social locations and histories, cultural meanings and semiotics and pay attention to political economy and ecology, which indicates that 'you can't have a serious conversation about food without talking about human rights, climate change and justice. Food not only affects everything, it represents everything' (Bittman 2021: xiv).

As Bittman (2021) and many other food scholars argue, food studies constitute a "field" because of

its interdisciplinary range and its steady consolidation in scholarship and knowledge generation globally. Such consolidated work includes taught courses (see for example, undergraduate and postgraduate courses at universities such as Indiana, Arizona, Michigan and others in the US), dedicated journals (for example, *Food Studies: An International Journal, The International Journal of Food Studies, Gastronomica: The Journal of Food Studies*), anthologised scholarly chapters and accessible yet incisive essays, podcasts, conferences and many kinds of digitally circulated resources.

Food studies, often now better-known as Critical Food Studies, distinguish the field from applied food studies, food science and technology studies, scientific studies of food and agriculture. These draw on disciplines in the natural sciences and are concerned primarily with issues such as increasing reliable food productivity, ensuring food safety and regulation. Critical Food Studies can also be distinguished from public health approaches, food security studies, food sovereignty studies, food justice studies and land and livelihood policy and scholarly work. With these approaches to food, the emphasis is placed on the physiological well-being of individual bodies and group's food access and health, rather than on the symbolic meanings attached to food and eating, the aesthetics and taste of food, the memories and associations that connect certain foods and food events to social and cultural ones. Epistemologically, the field of Critical Food Studies draws on some methods, approaches, core issues and insights from social sciences and natural science disciplines.

Moreover, as a field of study, Critical Food Studies are invariably inter- and multidisciplinary; it would be counterproductive to neatly separate it from "what it is not". What is distinctive about Critical Food Studies is that it turns to food as an optic for directing attention to the semiotic, cultural, social and historical meanings and legacies of food. Consequently, it avoids fixating on clear-cut answers to such questions as: How does one produce safe and nutritious food? Which groups dominate the world food system or what political strategies are needed to overturn this? How can increasing production assist with solving hunger and starvation in the world today? Which technical, scientific or organisational strategies can increase or transform food production for the future? While these may all be important questions, Critical Food Studies seeks to address rather than to ask the how and why questions; questions distinctive to the humanities and some branches of the social sciences. As the chapters in this book will illustrate, these include: How do people make sense of their worlds through food? How is food linked to a sense of national belonging and identity? Which discourses guide particular interest groups, communities or societies to approach

food in certain ways and what are the underpinnings of these discourses?

Despite the dearth of scholarship that addresses these questions in South African scholarship, these questions preoccupy many citizens' everyday lives globally. The questions also drove the earliest food studies scholarship in the early and mid-1900s, including Raymond Williams (1973) (on taste), Roland Barthes (1982), Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and Claude Lévis Strauss (1978). In the wake of this work, feminists from different disciplines went on to deepen and extend the field to include what food means to humans and different societies, how power relations evolve in relation to food access and food work, how ideas about taste are linked to classed and caste standards (Turner 2018) and even how food smells have special resonance in thinking about classed norms and hierarchies, food tastes and memories or the desire and yearning for emotionally and biologically fulfilling sustenance (Elabdali 2024). As discussed above, in many parts of the global north, food studies scholarship, driven from humanities perspectives, has made tremendous inroads into academic teaching and publications. Indeed, the writings of critical scholars such as Michael Pollan (2014), has popularised Critical Food Studies as a field of study and research across contexts.

The rapid upsurge of humanities-driven work on food has not occurred in South Africa as fast as it has in the global north. It is as though the human complexities that food inevitably raise were being erased in dominant trends in the scholarship, with food being confronted mainly as a source of physical sustenance and gustatory pleasure and nutrition. Consequently, in South Africa and in many other parts of the global south, food is studied in agricultural and natural sciences and related fields focussing on such areas as food security and food sovereignty. The assumption—whether explicit or implicit—is that food must be confronted primarily or only as a resource for human survival or productivity. As Richa Nagar asserts, this fixation with the 'hunger of the belly' is the 'common sense handed down to us by dominant frameworks that require us to separate hunger of the belly from hunger of the soul, unemployment form resistance, activism from spirituality, social justice from poetic justice, law from poetry' (Nagar 2019: 178). The utilitarian, positivist and productivity-focussed orientation of much food studies neglects the human dimensions of food, and what it means. While most scholars who approach food studies from this orientation often argue that, if the serious crises around food access and hunger in South Africa warrants attention, the humanities, the poetic, the playful, the ambiguous or complex are indulgent. This book insists that this is not the case, arguing that critical humanities that use food as an optic, work, allowing us to understand much more about our pasts, presents and future worlds that we might assume.

This chapter introduces the theoretical underpinnings of Critical Food Studies and explores three key concepts—identity, embodiment and representation. The aim is to help develop a more nuanced appreciation for South Africa's food practices, experiences and complex power dynamics. As demonstrated in the three sections that make up the rest of the book, these issues frame the chapters, with the subheadings (to which we return in respective sections framing connected chapters) largely constituting over-arching areas for current and emerging work in humanities-oriented food studies—both in South Africa and beyond. The centrality of these categories, as well as many of the concepts, key arguments and subject matter are, therefore, pivotal to evolving work in the relatively new trans-disciplinary field of food studies.

Food as a marker of self and other

Understanding an individual's sense of self and how this reflects the social and cultural groups, is an intricate process. Critical Food Studies scholars, keen to untangle some of this complexity, use food as a marker to map how individuals and communities interact and shape their sense of being. Such mapping includes examining how food choices, culinary practices and dietary restrictions symbolise who we are and who we are not. The act of eating, therefore, transcends biological necessity, and becomes an expression of our cultural heritage, values and beliefs. Stuart Hall's (1990) approach to understanding identity as a process of "becoming" aptly explains this interaction. According to Hall, identities are constantly constructed and negotiated when they interact with other actors. A prime example of this negotiation is the mapping of *foodways*, which explores how food practices, beliefs and rituals are shared. Foodways evolve as cultures mingle as well as in response to shifting political priorities. Perhaps the most obvious example of this dynamic is how, under apartheid, food practices were used to assert racial hierarchies and determine a particular sense of belonging. For example, a *braai* symbolised white leisure culture and became synonymous with alcohol and rugby. Post 1994 and the end of the legal apartheid, there have been efforts to incorporate the *braai* tradition into black South African culture as a marker of their own evolving identities (Nugent 2010). This evolution was encouraged by anti-apartheid activist Archbishop Desmond Tutu to push the country's National Heritage Day holiday (24 September) to be celebrated as National Braai Day. It may be safe to assume that Archbishop Tutu's reasons included a deliberate attempt to develop not only a unified national identity among the racialised groups (by the apartheid system), but also a national culinary heritage inclusive of all. This effort has, however, been contested with some black South Africans rejecting the term *braai* as an attempt to mute national dialogue on race and

ethnicity (Yount-Andre and Zembe 2023).

Theories of intersectionality also acknowledge how interactions between race, class, gender and sexuality mould identity, which is seen most obviously through the food practices that either reinforce or challenge these intersecting power structures. As the chapter by Brian Sibeko in this volume illustrates, a commonly cited example is that of black South Africans who consume "luxury foods" like sushi or who buy groceries from high-end grocery stores, the so-called status consumption of food. Such consumers are perceived as upwardly mobile individuals whose social status includes disposable income and whose consumption behaviour effectively reinforces racialised wealth disparities (Kaus 2013). Others include those who use status consumptions as a strategy to improve their social standing in a society that usually marginalises them (for example, black gay men).

On a personal level, our food choices and culinary practices illustrate the stories we tell about ourselves. These "culinary narratives" have been influenced by family recipes and recipe books (Cusack 2000; Englebrecht 2013), such as the South African bestseller *Kook 'n Geniet* (Cook and Enjoy) that have been passed down through generations. They are also reflected in the way restaurants adapt their menus (Fisher and Du Rand 2022). In addition, food allergies, religious dietary laws and ethical food choices have also shaped perceived identities and navigating these restrictions in social settings highlights the essential social aspects of food.

Essentially, food can be a source of division or a bridge connecting individual choices to the broader social context. Food is a key marker that shapes one's perceptions of self and one's interaction with others. Food can define boundaries while also fostering connections and helping us appreciate social differentiation and our distinct cultural identity.

Intersection between food, embodiment and the body politic

In many ways our understanding of self, overlaps with embodiment (Steel and Zinn 2017). From this perspective, food can embody our sense of injustice and inequity and the very act of eating can be a form of political expression and activism.

Before food is ingested and tasted, it is experienced both physically and through the sensory

dimensions of food practices. The textures, aromas and flavours in a dish evoke joy, memories, traditions and a connection with one's cultural past which ultimately influences social hierarchies, a nation's identity and its political discourse. In an extreme example, Donna Haraway's (1991) '*Cyborg Manifesto*' offers an interesting perspective on how our bodies interact with food and food production practices. Such practices, Haraway argues, include the use of pesticides, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and the growing popularity of processed foods that are often marketed to low-income communities, which affect our bodily health. In similar arguments, food studies scholars have also noted the influence that large food corporations have on policymaking and are keen to explore how policy prioritises profit over public health. Gómez (2022) has explored this relationship in Mexico and Brazil, while Igumbor et al. (2012); Abdool Karim, Kruger and Hofman (2020) and Mialon, Crosbie and Sacks (2020) have all examined the industry's influence on South Africa's policy making processes.

In the South Africa context, studying the embodied food experience illustrates the unequal power dynamic that is baked into the food landscape (Kesselman 2023). Access inequality is often linked to the so-called "food deserts" in low-income communities, which highlight and reinforce divisions within the country's social fabric and political consciousness (Caesar and Crush 2016). The persistent spatial and racial inequalities that continue to separate South African communities have also limited access to fresh, healthy foods, leading to higher rates of malnutrition and diet-related diseases, such as obesity, type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. This has led scholars to investigate how formal and informal food sources overlap and interact to create social exclusion and malnutrition (Battersby 2019; Battersby and Crush 2014).

Rising to challenge these inequalities, the broader food justice movement, particularly those pushing the concept of food sovereignty (Moyo and Thow 2020), are lobbying for systemic change and healthier outcomes. To ascertain the merits of such a recipe, Kanosvamhira (2024) examined how urban community gardens could be included in a model for harvest sales that fosters sustainable urban agriculture and food justice in the global south. Similarly, Yount-André and Zembe's (2023) focussed on how social inequalities determine the political significance of eating meat versus choosing a vegetarian diet.

Representing and re-imagining food

Long before the surge of work in transdisciplinary food studies, scholarship by cultural studies scholar and philosopher, Roland Barthes (1982), anthropologist Claude Lévi Strauss (1978) and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) explored the intricacies of food's semiotic and interpretive meanings within certain societies, among groups, and transnationally. Often drawing directly or indirectly on these scholars' insights, food studies scholars have recognised that food is never simply a material resource, but always redefined within specific symbolic and meaning-making systems. The very fact that what constitutes "food" is often defined culturally, and what is deemed edible or not, or special or mundane in different contexts, makes it clear that it is never devoid of social and cultural signification. An obvious example is that for many French people, snails are a delicacy, whereas for those who are unfamiliar with the idea of a mollusc being edible, ingesting these creatures seems abhorrent. In South Africa, many ethnic groups find eating tripe, trotters and "offal"[4] pleasurable. Yet for others, the idea of eating the head or intestines of a sheep is appalling, although these same people may find raw fish (which they fondly call sushi) highly enjoyable (unimaginable as food for certain offal eaters of cooked meat).

One of the first rules in acknowledging that food is always socially constructed, represented and imagined, is to respect the relationality of the meanings accorded to specific food items or cuisines, and to accept how varied food tastes and meanings are respected. One crucial way of ensuring this respect is by understanding the histories through which certain foods come to be valued under certain socio-political circumstances. To take the example of offal in South Africa, we could speculate that many South Africans had limited access to all parts of butchered animals or ate as much as possible of what an animal could provide or ate what was discarded by those who had the buying and social power to choose. A similar explanation has been given for why the intestines of pigs (known as chitlins) have been important in black American cuisine. However, some black food scholars have stressed that attributing food tastes only to what groups must eat because of their limited options, distorts the agencies and culinary inventiveness of socially and historically marginalised groups. Consequently, how food is represented and valued cannot be explained solely because of socioeconomic factors, but has much to do with the sensory, olfactory, visceral and aesthetic meanings that certain foods, food rituals and dishes hold for certain groups.

4 Offal can include inner organs as well as the heads of animals such as sheep and goats, and is relished by many Namaqualanders (Nama people from the Namaqualand region of Namibia and South Africa), for example.

Critical Food Studies in South Africa: Pedagogical and research aims

Within the South Africa context, Critical Food Studies have been used to reimagine current debates on food and to push them past a mere systems analysis and towards a more active engagement. Scholars in the field aim to critically examine food landscapes and surface issues such as ready access, equity and sustainability of food sources. In addition, others are keen to balance these issues with the persistent effects of colonialism and apartheid which continue to exacerbate food and health inequalities in the country. These inequalities have prompted scholarly interest in Alternative Food Networks (AFN) and how these initiatives are able to make access more just and sustainable (Bos and Luke 2016; Cerrada-Serra et al. 2018; Jarosz 2008). Furthermore, scholars such as Mert-Cakal and Miele (2022) have studied the potential of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)—community gardens and farmers markets—to understand how their ecological and social values might potentially mitigate the effects of the world's industrialised food system. However, despite their potential benefits, there is much debate about how accessible CSA initiatives are for low-income households (Vasquez et al. 2016), and whether they reproduce social inequalities (Guthman 2011; Moragues-Faus and Marsden 2017).

As an academic field, Critical Food Studies seeks to push beyond such systems analyses and is instead used as a lens through which to recognise, reimagine and reinvigorate the study of food as an entry point into understanding relationships, identities, histories and social justice/injustice in society. To illustrate, a few studies have explored how food is produced, consumed, what it symbolises and how it shapes South African society (Muimba-Kankolongo 2018). As discussed throughout this chapter, Critical Food Studies is an inherently interdisciplinary field that matches the ubiquity of food and mixes perspectives from history, anthropology, sociology, economics and nutrition to create much richer insights. As Cargill (2005) argues, much like other interdisciplinary areas such as women's studies and critical African studies, the field of critical food studies encourages scholars of all stripes to synthesise various disciplinary theories and methodologies.

Centring South Africa's unique socio-political experience within the broader field of Critical Food Studies, presents an underexplored angle in the field, with the potential for extrapolating local experience to the global level, including, among others, the chapters elevating marginalised voices, such as those of small-scale farmers, informal food vendors and communities struggling with food insecurity included in this book. As described in the special issue *Gender Questions* on

'*Critical Food Studies in South Africa: Feminist Perspectives'* (Lewis and Reddy 2021), including these voices has the potential to facilitate a more just and nuanced representation of food. Furthermore, by identifying key issues, new research into South Africa's food landscape is possible. Such research aims to challenge dominant narratives and evolve a more just and sustainable food future that can physically and metaphorically feed this society.

One of the most exciting pedagogical and research features of this book is its evolution that involved frequent engagement between established scholars and new-generation and postgraduate writers. Several years ago, the book was identified as a key project in a programme dedicated to expanding research, supervision and new generation writing in the field of Critical Food Studies. Several journal special issues have also come out of this work (*Gender Questions,* a special issue on *Critical Food Studies in South Africa: Feminist Perspectives*; an issue of Food Studies in South Africa for *Matatu, A Journal of African Culture*, Agenda's special issue, *Transnational Perspectives on Gender, Food and Ecology* and a special issue titled *Reading Africa Through Food* for the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*). What has been striking in working with mainly young authors for this book and in the journal issues, has been their excited and passionate perceptiveness about the rapidly changing food worlds, that are so intimately connected to transforming subjectivities and intersecting social locations. It is as though the dynamism of food worlds in the present—whether we see this optimistically (for example, new creolised foods and new ways of food travelling among groups) or pessimistically (alarming changes in foodscapes, food processes and shocks for our environment), these dynamics are being taken extremely seriously as foci for theoretically rigorous and nuanced empirical studies. As the framing sections that introduce each subsection in this book will demonstrate, much of this work indexes the pivotal ideas of earlier food studies scholars, such as Roland Barthe (1982), or scholars whose work has now come to be used extensively in food studies, such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984), or the long traditions of feminist scholars who have consistently foregrounded the centrality of domestic work, of kitchen politics and texts such as recipes as important archives. This work, especially in South Africa, deserves to be deepened, expanded on and even challenged, whether through various forms of academic publications, or through supervised dissertations and thesis by new scholars and writers who have become increasingly interested in what is both so quotidian and necessary for all humans, yet also very complex and fascinating.

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