

# THE FINE AND THE TASTELESS ISTRIAN CULINARY EXPERTS AND TASTE

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*The interpretation in this article<sup>1</sup> draws upon Bourdieu's work on the relationship between food, consumption, and cultural identity to show how Istrian culinary experts' knowledge is constructed and established as a form of cultural capital. Expertise in Istrian cuisine is a form of cultural capital that my research partners possess to a great extent and entrust to other people and goods, which subsequently gain a higher value. The experts are a rather coherent group; however, in addition to describing the sources of their cultural capital, I discuss their internal divisions and question their inclusivist stance.*

Keywords: taste, Istria, experts, food, cultural capital.

*V tem članku na podlagi Bourdieujevega dela o odnosu med hrano, potrošnjo in kulturno identiteto interpretiram, kako je znanje istrskih kulinaričnih ekspertov ustvarjeno in postavljeno kot oblika kulturnega kapitala. Poznavanje istrske kuhinje je kulturni kapital, ki ga moji raziskovalni partnerji v veliki meri posedujejo in podeljujejo drugim posameznikom in dobrinam, ki posledično pridobijo višjo vrednosti. Kljub temu, da eksperti predstavljajo precej enovito skupino, pa poleg opisovanja virov njihovega kulturnega kapitala razpravljam o njihovi notranjih delitvah in preprašujem njihovo načelno inkluzivnost.*

Ključne besede: okus, Istra, eksperti, hrana, kulturni kapital

## INTRODUCTION

“I didn’t want to lose readers straightaway by immersing them in a pool of murky and obscure terminology. Better to let them dunk their toes before they dive in. My aim was to gently invite readers to go on a voyage with me, one in which we would be discovering and making something together.” (Bochner 2014: 13)

My boyfriend accompanied me on some of my fieldwork interviews. On one occasion, after an interview with an Istrian culinary expert, my boyfriend and I were offered dinner. The “truffle king” said “I just cannot let you go without eating something; wait here.” My research partners were always very kind and hospitable, and he was no exception. In a few minutes, the plaid tablecloth was replaced with a spotless white one, on which wine glasses and attractive plates were placed. My interviewee (i.e., the cook and the owner of the restaurant) proudly served us well-decorated dishes; the first one consisted of homemade grilled ricotta, eggplant crisps, fresh shavings of black truffles, and a dash of olive oil—the regular cherry on top.

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Because my boyfriend had never tried truffles before, I was excited for him to eat this exquisite food—but it turned out that he found the smell of truffles horrible. He could not swallow even a morsel of the starter, and so when the cook left to prepare the main dish I angrily ate mine as well as his appetizer. What was going on in my mind was that my boyfriend did not have the slightest idea of what it means to have “taste”; I even teased him by asking if he wanted some Coke in his wine. I, on the one hand, felt the fear of disappointing the “truffle king,” who had voluntarily prepared this food only for us, and, on the other hand, doubted my boyfriend’s refinement.

The main dish was homemade *fuži* (in Italy known as *garganelli*), a kind of pasta considered typical for Istria, with truffles, which my boyfriend also refused to eat. I became even more upset. This time I could not eat for both, but I did not want to offend the cook, so I ate a bit of mine and a bit of my boyfriend’s *fuži*. The dinner was followed by a fight on our way home; symbolic violence is not always that tacit after all. I was questioning his preferences, but in hindsight I know that I doubted his cultural capital—truffles are after all a symbol of good taste as well as economic capital.

Through the act of cooking, humans distinguish themselves from non-humans, the first normally standing for culture, and the second for nature. Furthermore, “civilized” alimentary practices separate “modern” societies from “primitive” ones, or communicate group identity within the very same society (Godina Golija 1996: 10). Collective food practices therefore not only differ from country to country or from clan to clan, but also between rich and poor, rural and urban, female and male, and other dimensions. By means of food, people manifest *who* they are, not only as persons but also collectively, which group they belong to (Mintz and Du Bois 2002: 109). In point of fact, food is not only social glue, but also a delimiter between groups.

A few months ago, when I was writing the story above in my fieldwork notes, I did not imagine I would use it in a paper. I found it when leafing through my notes and decided to use it in order to shed the seriousness that our discipline normally employs (Podjed 2011). In addition, my vignette tells a lot about how omnipresent taste distinctions in fact are and it offers a good introduction to readers, but also indicates that the lives of anthropologists are not immune to “defining good taste”—which prevents me, the author, from talking about “them,” the experts, and more generally about “us” humans.

This article illustrates how eating practices solidify group memberships in the case of Istrian food experts. This text has its origins in my master’s thesis, which focused on the Istrian Peninsula, which is to a large extent made coherent by Istrian food. The idea of unique Istrian cuisine is supported by regional gourmet heroes, who bring into being and distribute ideas about what “authentic” Istrian cuisine is. The experts are those that I am concerned with because they produce gastronomic knowledge, which spreads among the inhabitants of the Istrian Peninsula, forming an intangible resource of Istrian character *par excellence*. It is within this context that I started the article with a personal vignette, in



Haute Istrian cuisine (Blog Jem zunaj, <http://jemzunaj.blogspot.si/2015/05/rizibizi-elitni-portoroz.html>).

which I indicate the omnipresence of cultural capital and later try to find its source(s) in the case of my “refined” research partners. Below I introduce the notion of “taste,” examine the roots of culinary experts’ tastefulness or cultural capital (which is not only possessed, but can be entrusted to other individuals or materials as well), and then I detect a moderate separation within the group of experts studied; namely, rural versus urban. Regardless of the internal division, there still exist characteristics pertinent to the entire expert assembly, which has an elite<sup>2</sup> status because of their colossal cultural capital. In the last part of the article, I discuss experts’ inclusive exclusivism, a conceptual amalgamation combined with a rather exclusivist practice.

Before digging into taste as a form of aesthetic choices, some basic information about my research is necessary. In order to finish my two-year journey as a master student at the University of Ljubljana and University of Vienna, I conducted a research in the spring and summer months of 2015. The fieldwork took place in the region of Istria, which I consider a rather homogeneous unit and therefore a relevant frame of study. Within Istria, food is what I was concerned with the most, but even more with culinary experts. The term “expert” is an emic term, referring to people that are widely recognized as knowledgeable and/or especially skilled in preparing dishes constructed as being part of Istrian cuisine. However, they often share among themselves historically partially verified information, but they label themselves and are defined by the majority of those around them as experts. Despite this objection, I decided to use the emic term. I studied the discourses of nineteen experts from different parts of Istria, personally talked to fourteen of them, and conducted one to two interviews with twelve of them.

<sup>2</sup> In this article I do not go into ‘elites’ as a concept, theory, and research tradition, which could further illuminate fieldwork stories of culinary experts. More on that has been written by George Marcus (1983).

## TASTE

According to William Ian Miller, it was the seventeenth century when taste became more important; taste not in its very physical and sensual meaning, but as the ability or a gift to perceive aesthetic value and recognize vulgarity. The wider signification of “taste” is a capacity to know the refined; it concerns excellence, education, wealth, genius in architecture, clothing, speech, and many others aspects, including eating (Miller 2006). Rather than using the almost “vulgar” notion of “eating,” sophisticated gourmet aficionados bring into play the term “gastronomy.” Social historian Jean-Louis Flandrin researched whether the idea of good taste developed first in the domain of culinary practices or in arts and literature. He reveals facts that prove both, but assumes that cooks were those to aestheticize food to such a degree that it allowed the idea of good taste to spread beyond gastronomy (Flandrin 1986: 301). Before I turn to Pierre Bourdieu—who is, needless to say, crucial when talking about manifested preferences—I quote from Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), in which he curiously anticipates Bourdieu’s main message:

To begin with, there is the frightful debauchery of taste that has already been effected by a century of mechanisation. . . . But as a single instance, take taste in its narrowest sense—the taste for decent food. In the highly mechanical countries, thanks to tinned food, cold storage, synthetic flavouring matters, etc., the palate is almost a dead organ. As you can see by looking at any greengrocer’s shop, what the majority of English people mean by an apple is a lump of highly-coloured cotton wool from America or Australia; they will devour these things, apparently with pleasure, and let the English apples rot under the trees. It is the shiny, standardized, machine-made look of the American apple that appeals to them; the superior taste of the English apple is something they simply do not notice. . . . And what applies to food applies also to furniture, houses, clothes, books, amusements and everything else that makes up our environment. These are now millions of people, and they are increasing every year, to whom the blaring of a radio is not only a more acceptable but a more normal background to their thoughts than the lowing of cattle or the song of birds.

Some thirty years after Orwell, Bourdieu introduced a systematic theory of “cultural classes” that explains power disparities in France in the 1960s, but its meaningful message can be applied to various societies. *La Distinction* is a critical work on taste and power in French society: on how what is seen as good or bad taste is culturally constructed and contributes to the maintenance of symbolic power relations. Bourdieu’s idea is that power is connected to symbols, but the ruling class is the one defining the ranking of symbols

and the form of dominant discourse. The class outlines the criteria of good taste and has a hold over it, which enables them to produce surplus cultural capital. “Bourdieu pays close attention to the little routines people enact again and again in working, eating, sleeping, and relaxing, as well as the little scenarios of etiquette they play out repeatedly in social interaction” (Dirks et al. 1994: 398).

I remember growing up not being allowed to listen to the Spice Girls very loud because the neighbors might hear, whereas my father’s Pat Matheny CDs could resonate as loud as possible. His enthusiasm for what he calls real music—my musical education, but all in all my *habitus*—caused me to reject pop tunes by the age of twelve and snobbishly bring Billy Cobham’s CD to school a year later. However, it is not only music, but also food consumption that produces and reproduces class identities and cultures that structure power relations. “Tastes for particular types of food and ways of eating are far from individual, but have their basis in class cultures and lifestyles” (Ashley et al. 2004: 60).

Istrian food experts find *čevapčiči* (rolled kebabs) to be a symbol of bad taste—it is not that they believe *čevapčiči* necessarily taste bad, but that the people that find them appetizing are considered inferior because they lack the competence to appreciate fine food. Truffles, on the other hand, rank high on taste scale and reveal that cultural capital is typically connected to economic capital, although not necessarily. *Polenta*, for instance, is a cheap foodstuff that nonetheless ranks almost as high as truffles on the “good taste” scale. Higher classes use their power to construct their own tastes as the legitimate tastes and pathologize the tastes of other classes. Because each individual reacts to food according to his or her *habitus*, food preferences can establish durable social borders. Jose Johnston and Slyn Baumann (2007: 197-198) claim this border is not anymore the traditional one between high and low classes, but between the culture approved by food authorities or institutions and the culture that lacks such approval.

White bread went from being a festive, luxurious food to being the cheapest, most tasteless, unhealthy poor man’s bread. A friend of mine that recently moved to Reykjavik told me the only bread she can afford to buy is soft white sliced sandwich bread; a bag of it costs (only) about two euros. Food is neither good nor bad in the absolute, although people recognize it as such. The criteria vary in space and time because taste is a cultural product (Montanari 2006: 61–66). In short, what is considered sophisticated and refined changes, but there are several different ideas about how exactly this happens. Thorstein Veblen refers to a “trickle-down” procedure: that fashions appear at the top and are gradually copied by lower social strata (Veblen 1994). Others, such as Mike Featherstone, question the concept of trickle-down and demonstrate that modern fashion influences may travel sideways and even socially upwards (Featherstone 1991)—such as the whole-grain bread that replaced white bread, or *mohant* cheese, a traditional product from Bohinj and its vicinity that went from rural to elite cuisines, where chefs incorporate it into their dishes (Godina Golija 2012). Di Giovine (2014) similarly discusses *cucina casareccia*, a rural cuisine that has been elevated to heritage cuisine. This is previous everyday cuisine that has been rediscovered.



27/05

## 4. black truffle festival

Restaurant Belvedur Istria and truffles Šavle organizing the 4th Festival of black truffle

<http://www.gostilna-belvedur.si/en/categories/dogodki-1/>



One of the experts, preparing “fuži” with truffles.

<http://www.gostilna-belvedur.si/en/photto-gallery/priprava-nasih-specialitet/#>

In contrast, Wilk (1997) stresses that a differential approach may just as well be expressed in terms of dislike and repudiation of certain food, not only in desire for consumption.

*Haute* cuisine is indeed often perceived as pretentious and absurd by lower cultural strata. For example, a visitor to a culinary festival commented on artichoke ice cream: “what else are they going to come up with, what happened to normal food?” The working classes may reject the creations of celebrity chefs (Caplan et al. 1998), but lower social classes on the other hand copy certain supposedly sophisticated elements. The *modus operandi* of changes in good taste is therefore hard to grasp because there is a lack of a predictable pattern; however, in brief, the changes that occur derive from different sources, most often from the lowest class. A segment of their “low” culture appears exotic to the classier one, is adopted, and then does not belong to popular culture anymore. Slowly the elite become the ones that know about traditions (Billiard 2006: 123) and then, when not refused by the lower class, modified traditions again move downward among those that knew it first.

*Haute* traditional cuisines, when cosmopolitan elites are inspired by poor man’s dishes, bridge the class divide, yet the internal divide between two kinds of cuisines is never truly erased (Sammells 2014). Following Montanari, the pattern of eating is the first sign of difference between classes, but when food became a widespread commodity this diet law adapted. The amount or the price ceased to be of the essence, and in its stead arose the valorization of “geographic food” (Montanari 2006: 81). Food coming from a specific environment or *terroir* is the new food of the privileged. This version of gastronomy promises to save us from the daunting troubles that modernity brought—or, one might say, to save us from ourselves

## EXPERTS’ CULTURAL CAPITAL

More than a century and a half ago, zealous individuals played an important role in constructing national dishes, hence unifying a nation, and comparable processes have recently again been carried out by what Godina Golija calls intellectuals and citizens of urban communities (2012: 101). I prefer to call them culinary experts, who on a regional or local level fight against the globalization of culture and strive for a better quality of life, particularly in certain regions that are very important for tourism and agriculture.

My interviewees believe they have particular knowledge not only about Istrian food, but about gastronomy in general. In brief, they know what is “right.” The main component of their knowledge comes from the environment, from the *terroir* itself. The concept of *terroir* is not established as a term in Istria, except among those more connected to Italy, who thus talk of *territorio*. This concept of French origin, which developed to prop up the wine industry, is nonetheless extremely useful for my endeavors. A growing number of academics use this concept that is similar to “region” in a way, but more clearly defined. However, its meaning has changed, or rather expanded, in the past few decades because it

initially indicated only environmental and geographical characteristics that give individual foodstuffs their taste, but changed to also include the human factors of the area and, finally, the aura of genuineness and authenticity that only a specific *terroir* could provide (Demossier 2011).

All of the experts consider their place of birth and upbringing extremely important for who they are and what they do. Istrian *terroir* has provided the food with unique characteristics, but analogously bestowed these characteristics upon my interlocutors too. Their immense cultural capital consists of natural and cultural rudiments that the experts lean on, and these are discussed in this article.

The following quote from fieldwork provides good insight into culinary experts' strong Istrian character. This is what one of my food expert interviewees remembers that she said sometime in the 1980s, when Slovenian census takers asked her what she identifies with:

I first said I'm Istrian, then I'm Yugoslav because I have to be, and then I live in Slovenia, but for me there is Istria, I'm Istrian. The man asking said I was the first one to say that, but it's true, you can't say it isn't the case! If you live here and you are native here . . . . My ancestors have also been here for so long.

The experts all call themselves native, and even one that was born a few kilometers outside of the region thinks of herself as *Istrian vera* 'true Istrian'. However, her biography is problematic for her expert status, and I return to this later. On the one hand, their genes, as well as their particular knowledge, make the experts Istrian. On the other hand, their cultural capital derives from culture: the word *nonna* is used to refer to both. Each of the research partners mentioned nonna at least once, the word is sometimes pronounced with a non-geminate *n* but means exactly the same as in Italian: 'grandmother'. By providing a natural and cultural pillar, nonna authorizes the knowledge of experts. *Le tagliatelle di nonna Pina* is a well-known Italian children's song that praises grandmother's sensational pasta, which provides energy and vitamins for the whole day. This simple idea of grandmother's matchlessness appears in the field in the names of restaurants that present themselves as traditional, in names of recipes, and stories that legitimize experts' Istrian character.

Another point my interlocutors typically put forth is that they never need to measure anything, whether it comes to cooking, farming, or making wine. Recipes from conventional cookbooks provide exact amounts of ingredients or minutes needed for a successful final result, whereas Istrian recipe collections often lack precise information. Experts reject strict instructions; it gives their recipes a mystical background and stresses their own talent. They say that, because of her profound knowledge, experience, and flexibility in the kitchen, their *nonna* or *mama* also did not weigh foodstuffs.

The past makes experts and their expertise unique, and therefore superior to those coming from the outside claiming to know things about Istria. "We know what there is

to know. Some smartasses come and want to tell me how it used to be here in the past; no one can tell me how it was because I was born here and I know exactly how it was!” The confident pro-periphery stance that is typical for regions is clear also from another statement I heard in the field:

Someone (hits the table with his hand) from Ljubljana says he knows more than us, you can't, no you can't because no university degree will help you. Okay, you're a doctor, I don't know what, but no, we know how it was and can't change it, it gets on my nerves . . . Moon Bay,<sup>3</sup> did you hear about this? I don't know where this name came from, someone from Ljubljana decided to name it Moon Bay, I don't know why. It makes me feel sick, I want to throw up, really, it has been in use for about five, six, maybe ten years, but it's terrible, I want to cut my veins, we can't bear these things!

Being born in a certain place is, however, not enough to become what Marshall Sahlins (1963) called a “Big Man” in the case of Melanesia. Just as the latter has no formal authority, the culinary experts in Istria do not. My research partners are also not “famous for being famous” (Boorstin 1992) because there are particular reasons that made culinary experts famous, at least on a local scale. I knew of my interviewees before conducting the fieldwork, and most other people in Istria also know of their existence, mainly because the experts often appear in the media as culinary gurus; moreover, their media presence is increasing. The media can impose judgments on the degree of experts' professionalism and influence their reputation and consequently commercial activities.

The people I call experts have in most cases been connected to food all their lives, either working on a farm, cooking, or growing up in a family where food is more than a stomach-filling material. However, experts' competences are something that they were not only born with, but also purchased in the form of training. This cultural capital manifests itself at an individual level as a kind of second nature that distinguishes an individual from others that have not enjoyed such training and background. These culinary connoisseurs stand against the underclass. Boundaries between them are then actively maintained in a variety of subtle ways.

Experts' grown-up lives are also crucially linked to gastronomy in their work, which means they depend on it financially. They promote Istrian food through cooking, preparing, growing, or distributing it, but most of all disseminating ideas about what “true” Istrian cuisine is. Their activities have general recognition, which the media only supports.

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<sup>3</sup> Moon Bay (*Mesečev zaliv*) is the name of a bay in vicinity of Strunjan, a small town where the interviewee comes from. Until recently people referred to it as Holy Cross Bay (*Zaliv svetega Križa*) because there is a cross above the bay, but some years ago the name *Moon Bay* appeared.

One of my interviewees happily stated how much she really appears in the media by saying “My neighbor has been making fun of me. She told me that lately, if she wants to see me, she just needs to turn on the TV.” Demossier similarly talks of French *vignerons*, usually male wine producers with a strong personality and a regional accent that are loved by the media and have changed the conventional image of a peasant (Demossier 2011). The coarse, uncouth commoners recently became *vignerons*, emblems of quality, although they ceased to actually work in the fields themselves.

The “localvores” that I put at the center of my research endeavor earn a decent amount of money through their food-related activities, but, as Muršič recently suggested (2013), it is difficult to tell whether they earn money because they are celebrities, or whether they are celebrities because they earn a lot. I believe the two are connected, but the cultural capital they possess, which is the basis of their expertise, is nevertheless not the same as economic capital. In addition to their knowledge, personal characteristics—among them confidence, communication skills, and social capital—were and are vital for their culinary careers.

## CERTIFICATION

Any kind of expert needs to obtain recognition from someone besides himself, and so, whereas in the 1990s a framed photograph of a president visiting the restaurant was an indicator of excellence, nowadays the same procedure has a more professionalized outline. The walls of restaurants, farms, or shops and their web pages are decorated with certificates confirming quality. Experts highly value such certificates as important. After one interview, my interviewee took me inside the restaurant where he works to show me the abundance of certificates they had received, but then started apologizing, “as you noticed, we were awarded two points less between 2004 and 2006, we should take these certificates down, they’re such an embarrassment.” On a scale from one to twenty, this restaurant was awarded two points less than their excellent average (sixteen), which really disturbs them, regardless of countless other certificates on their walls. I, for one, never would have noticed the “disgrace” on their walls if my informant had not pointed it out.

*Slow Food* and *Chilometro Zero* are powerful *terroir*-concerned alternative food movements that have entered Istria not only conceptually, but also concretely, awarding certificates. One of my research partners was the head of Trieste’s Slow Food branch; he was not only a television host, but coordinated Trieste’s Slow Food section, valuing heirloom food over imported food. Istrian culinary experts subsequently not only receive certificates, but award them to others as well. There are even some certificates that are awarded only within Istria; for example, *Tartufo Vero* (the ‘true truffle’) or a certificate for preparing *boškarin*.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The *boškarin* is variety of whitish-gray long-horned Istrian cattle. Its culinary revival has been supported by a certificate awarded to those with sufficient culinary standards to serve *boškarin* meat.



Istarski festival pašte's Photos in Prvi Festival pašte, 2014. Facebook. <http://tinyurl.com/ns2fuda>

The experts are not only those that judge whether or not a dish or the entire procedure deserves a certain award, but also those that receive these awards. Festivals are usually the occasions when certificates are awarded; the experts come and not only hand out or receive awards, but through their appearance can confirm that the festival *per se* is worth attending.

Talking to culinary experts often took a long time because our conversations would be interrupted by a myriad of phone calls. Once, a chef I was speaking with received a call from the organizer of the Istrian Pasta Festival in Žminj, who had put his photo on a festival's billboard advertisement without my interviewee's permission. The caller was asking whether the renowned chef could come and "perform" in Žminj. The chef was used to appearing somewhere just for the sake of being seen. He later told me how he often travels to restaurants abroad where, as a symbol of proper truffle preparation, he provides authenticity for the truffles served. He mockingly recalls such occasions as being in the dining room, wearing white gloves, smiling nicely, and shaving the truffles over steaming dishes.

Experts have an authority that can legitimize festivals and culinary products—not only ones they directly produce or give their "blessing" to, but also ones that they may not even know of, yet are judged authentic by consumers and could easily be made by the experts. The expert discourses are able to legitimize a broad range of commodities that somehow fall into the category of Istrian food. Authentic products thus have an Istrian aura, a historical value; they fight against globalization, take care of the environment, and return to the lost Eden. When a person consumes such a product, a bit of its aura is transferred to

him or her. Through their discourse and actions, experts license Istrian food as cultural capital. On the one hand, as producers of this ideology, they possess it—but, on the other hand, they are able to assign it to various commodities that consumers eat and through that acquire some of the cultural capital themselves. Especially through the media, experts produce, seek to manage, and systematize alterity through creating or playing off of readily understood stereotypes to their audience through idioms of food (Appadurai 1988), but the expert gourmets are not malicious because they themselves firmly believe in the power of Istrian food to bring the region back to health, nature, ecology, and tradition.

Rules are written, codified, and disseminated in cookbooks, and then secondarily diffused to wider audiences through food photography, TV shows, restaurant menus, workshops, and other means. The culinary experts I followed do not merely offer primers on how to cook through all of these means, but also on how to live. Kristina Meršak talks about the same thing in her analysis of a Slovene lifestyle cooking show (2013: 85). By acting as cultural intermediaries or new intellectuals, they make “available to almost everyone the distinctive poses, the distinctive games and other signs of inner riches” (Bourdieu 1984: 371). In this way, “they ‘inform and educate’ but the audience is no longer acquiring a basic skill, but is receiving an education in ‘the art of lifestyle’, on how to perform distinction by gaining pleasure and fun from all aspects of everyday life” (Ashley et al. 2004: 184).

## INTERNAL DIVISION

Nothing is as simple as it seems, above all in anthropology, which in Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s terms makes things rather more complex than straightforward (Eriksen 2010). Thus, the informal group of experts is also quite diverse. Each of my research partners is doubtless exclusive in one way or another, but as an anthropologist I am attentive to distinguishing broader patterns that join the group of experts studied together. However, I ought to mention an internal divide I noticed time and again while carrying out my fieldwork; namely, the rural-urban divide, which roughly equals the traditional-modern, local-global (oriented), and hinterland-coastal division. Culinary experts still form a rather coherent group because, despite the national borders that separate the region of Istria, their expert lives are extremely similar, but the internal partition presented above that I explore in this part of the text cannot be denied.

The more rural experts do not seem to care much about the modern trends, but excavate the past for useful leftovers, whereas urban dwellers are instead inspired by *nouvelle cuisine*, to which they also add deep-rooted historical elements. All of the experts have a high opinion of themselves and their proficiency; in Bourdieu’s terms, they possess a collection of sources called cultural capital, but the urban experts seem to have or strive to have even more. Lupton argues that “trying new foods and cuisine is also a sign of sophistication and distinction, of a willingness to be innovative and different from the masses” (1996: 127),

which holds true for the urban gourmet elite, which does not seek its specialness only in the past, but also in the up-to-the-minute. Urban experts not only incorporate ginger on their plates but Instagram their gastronomic experiences, hire a designer to arrange the workplace, head to see EXPO 2015, and use chemistry in the kitchen.<sup>5</sup> Urban experts do, nevertheless, not necessarily live in urban settlements, but work there—or perhaps not even that: they are simply connected to the urban sphere and utilize the ideas circulating in urban and more globally oriented places.

According to their visitors, those whom I call rural experts are less contemporary, and thus more authentic. They wear no white gloves, even when dealing with the exotically regarded truffles, and some even stand against mixers, freezers, or bananas. If their restaurants look a bit dirty, the guests often like it; it makes them feel that they have come to a “true peasant home” and it works as a brilliant marketing device for earning money by exploiting romanticized ideas of the past.

As Mediterraneans, Istrians are also perceived as less hardworking, slow, *dolce far niente* people, which is what those experts following urban trends believe they have escaped from. The second are then akin to label the first as backward and lazy, whereas the rural experts have the same opinion about their village neighbors, who, in their opinion, could engage in farming or crafts to attract more tourists and, together with culinary experts, create a small tourist destination. Rural experts see themselves as leaders of rural modernization although they, unlike urban culinary elites, appropriate modern elements sparingly, which might be due to their visitors’ desires for the homemade, the “as it once was,” and, after all, exotic experiences. One of those I spoke to contentedly said I that should have seen Livade, a village in central Istria, ten years earlier, before the huge restaurant was established, when there was no yearly truffle festival, truffle shop, or tourist accommodations. The fascination for Istrian food and truffles influenced the entire village: “before it was a *selendra* [a hamlet in a derogatory sense] where a man wouldn’t come even for an hour.” My informant also pompously mentioned the village roundabout, which never would have existed without the truffle business; the same is true for the benefits of the restaurant located nearby and, *summa summarum*, the benefits that all of Livade received from the commodification of truffles.

## INCLUSIVE EXCLUSIVISM

Istrian culinary experts do not really perceive themselves as part of a group; each of my interviewees sees himself or herself as “lonely at the top,” and so there is not much collaboration, but in fact the opposite: hidden competition. I am not talking about cutthroat competition, but a constant refined and glossed-over discrediting of fellow experts. When I

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<sup>5</sup> According to Rachel Ankeny, molecular gastronomy is contributing to a new form of cultural capital because of its “scientific accreditation” (Ankeny 2006: 45).

asked the experts about the source of their insights on Istrian cuisine, my research partners all claimed anything and anyone save for another Istrian expert, regardless of the amount of certificates he or she may possess. At times they would refer to an outsider, a person that is a culinary specialist in a different region<sup>6</sup> or, more often, to their ancestors, historical sources, and their own talents. The reason for this is not that they do not know about each other (because they do), but simply competition. When I asked them about other particular experts, they generally knew not only who they were, but offered detailed remarks on how they operated and emphasized how they had started their culinary missionary activities only very recently.

The previously mentioned female cook, *Istrian vera*, who moved from her village to Istria due to her marriage only when she was around twenty, was questioned because of her origins. A few years ago, a major dispute between her and a more powerful Istrian expert occurred when she used the Slovenian word *miške* instead of the Istrian *fritule*<sup>7</sup> (for a sort of fritter). He said she was not a true Istrian and for that reason could not represent Istrian food. The renowned complainant otherwise talked of his cookbooks as ethnographies because of the fact that he always stuck to emic terms and did not try to improve the “natural” appearance of the dishes. Another expert complained about the aforementioned female cook because she uses the phrase *po štajoni*, a local Istrian expression meaning ‘eating seasonally’, and so the critic protested: “she is from the continent and, well, she has been here for so many years, but is never like one who grew up here.” This second commentator used to work with her and seemingly appreciates her as a person, but mistrusts her knowledge of Istria and therefore opposes her using local expressions. Curiously, the female cook with problematic origins spoke in a stronger dialect than any of the other interviewees, perhaps to justify her skills. The rivalry is however clearly present among all of them, but they are not fighters; their cultural capital makes them, in simple terms, simply gossipmongers. In their own estimations, their understandings are unsurpassable, and thus threatened by the knowhow of other experts.

Occasions when experts perform as instructors also illustrate the contradiction between exclusivism and inclusivism well. While teaching, the experts share their views, but speak from a superior stance and, although those listening might become skilled in Istrian gastronomy, experts see it as impossible for them to match the expert knowledge. Their chance moves a bit closer if the student is a “native Istrian,” whatever that means.

Competitiveness contradicts the philosophical background of authentic food movements that normally, in quite a missionary-like manner, seek to spread their wisdom with

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<sup>6</sup> What I mean by a different region are not Slovenian or Croatian regions because most of the time Istria ignores their culinary accounts, but Italian or French gourmet experts that rank higher on the prestige scale and belong to the Mediterranean basin.

<sup>7</sup> *Fritule* are a good case of showing how it is in food’s nature to change regardless of the border; for example, Dalmatia considers them its cuisine, as does wider Slovenia too, but under another name: *miške*.

anyone that wants to listen. The concept is to bring people back on the right track, away from where the industrial revolution and its consequences brought them.<sup>8</sup> They do not only *want* to include as many as possible, but *need* to in order to create Istria “as it once was.” Then again, nothing is as reasonable as it seems. Boštjan Kravanja (2014) discussed the dynamics of contemporary swing dance communities that are simultaneously including and excluding. I was surprised how food experts arguing for authentic Istrian cuisine are analogous to swing experts; they both stem from ideological solidarity, which here and there vanishes under the shadows of segregation and symbolic violence. The paragraph above on the internal discrediting of the expert group is exactly an example of the latter.

The everyday habits of experts reveal almost unconscious modes of cultural domination over the ignorant eaters of French fries, cotton candy, or čevapčiči. The polarization becomes obvious when observing who the experts invite to a culinary festival or write an article about, or who they talk about (or, rather, do not). The mainstream food producers, distributors, and consumers are either ridiculed or ignored, so that even the mainstream food movement probably ends up agreeing that “authentic” or Istrian food is the “right” one to chose.

## CONCLUSION

Food choices are a powerful device for articulating group identities. Istrian cuisine is tied to a unique milieu and binds people within it through time and space. Bourdieu revealed taste as integral for denoting the “authenticity” of one’s membership in elite groups (Bourdieu 1984: 68) and Istrian food is thus a status resource *par excellence*. Experts are those in command of an abundance of cultural capital, which derives from their personal “natural” and cultural Istrian heritage. They also have the ability to authorize some event, foodstuff, or dish as authentic, which consumers consequently consume and thus acquire a little bit of cultural capital in the form of authentic Istria. However, according to Miele and Murdoch, the division between the fine and the tasteless is not so rigid, but more at a conceptual level because the members of both groups indulge food from different poles, and sometimes even at the same time (Miele and Murdoch 2003). For example, one can first go to a traditional restaurant and have some squid with polenta, but stop at McDonalds on the way home to get ice cream.

Experts deliver recipes for tasteful dishes as well as good life, which the large amount of cultural capital they are in possession of allows them to do. I rarely mention national affiliations because there really is not much difference in how the experts operate in terms of nationality. There is, however, a certain internal divide that I found relevant. All experts

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<sup>8</sup> A similar trend has been observed by Blaž Bajič (2014), who focuses on barefoot runners seeking to run in an authentic and natural manner.

draw from the idyllic past, and yet the urban ones pay significant attention to modern trends too. Their fascination with what is hip is either due to their personal urban *habitus* or to what the audience expects from them—probably both. I do not know to what extent the experts realize this internal divide because they really do not see themselves as being a part of any such group—if anything, they are the head of it. They constantly try to elbow out the other experts, but in a classy way; they are, after all, a class. The internal as well as external symbolic violence of the experts both turn out to contradict the broader conceptual background they adhere to. Although at times it does not seem so, the Istrian alternative food movement believes in changing people’s lives through the consumption of sophisticated Istrian food.

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## EKSPERTI ISTRSKE KULINARIKE IN OKUS

*Na podlagi izhodišč, da je Istra razmeroma homogena regija in da je kot taka ustrezen raziskovalni okvir, je avtorica raziskala »eksperte« za istrsko kulinariko, t.j. tiste posameznike, ki diskurze o istrski hrani ustvarjajo in širijo. Kot eksperti se ti posamezniki vidijo sami, kot take jih dojema tudi njihovo, razmeroma široko občinstvo. Raziskovalka je opazovala in intervjuvala eksperte iz različnih koncev Istre in različnih nacionalnih, etničnih, religioznih, spolnih in jezikovnih pripadnosti. S štirinajstimi je opravila en ali dva poglobljena intervjuja. Z analizo je ugotovila precejšnjo homogenost poznavalskih diskurzov, pa tudi podobnosti v družbenem statusu.*

*Osrednja os besedila je distinkcija, ki ekspere, tj. kulinarično elito loči od laične množice. Hrana, eden temeljev identitete, na eni strani skupine povezuje, na drugi pa krepko ločuje. Z uživanjem istrske hrane se elitna skupina loči od »brezokusnih nevednežev«, ki jim npr. bakala smrdi. Te vrste konceptualna delitev v resnici ne drži, saj večina posameznikov uživa hrano iz obeh polov, »istrskega« in »neistrskega«, velikokrat celo skupaj (Miele in Murdoch 2003). Za poznavalce je istrska hrana zdrava, tradicionalna, naravna, ekološka in avtentična; je edina prava in bi jo po mnenju ekspertov morali uživati vsi. Tudi tako bi prispevali k izboljšanju življenja v regiji in širše. V 60. letih 20. stoletja je Pierre Bourdieu napisal razpravo o dobrem okusu, ki ne zajema zgolj čuta za zaznavanje jedi, temveč tudi čut za zaznavanje lepega, skladnega, estetskega (Bourdieu 1984). Z okusom se kvalificiramo kot sofisticirani posamezniki, torej ljudje z okusom, hkrati pa nas okus klasificira. Kriteriji za določanje okusnega se spreminjajo skozi čas in prostor; še posebej so lastni skupini ljudi, ki nastopa kot elita z razvitim kulturnim kapitalom. Elitni družbeni razred tistim z manj kapitala odreka zmožnost presojanja o tem, kaj je lepo. Z uporabo Bourdieujeve perspektive avtorica oriše historično ozadje okusa, analizira kulinarske eksperte in vire njihovega kulturnega kapitala in poudari pomen certifikatov. Opiše tudi notranjo delitev, ki jo je kljub koherentnosti kulinarskih ekspertov v Istri, moč zaznati. Eksperti istrske hrane imajo kulturni kapital, ki izvira iz poznavanja istrske kulinarike in jim daje poseben status. Njihovo znanje ima na eni strani korenine v preprostem dejstvu, da so se rodili v Istri prednikom, ki so se prav tako rodili na tem polotoku, na drugi strani pa, da so tam odrasli, se socializirali v določeno kulturo. Zato v članku izpostavljam vzporednice med "naravnim" (terroirjem) in "kulturnim" kapitalom svojih sogovornikov. (Demossier 2011). Eksperti se navadno sklicujejo na svoje none, ki nastopajo kot "naravni", a tudi "kulturni" vir njihovega simbolnega kapitala; tudi sama jih v članku jemljem kot prisposodbo, ki povedno priča o omenjenih dveh koreninah kulturnega kapitala mojih sogovornikov. None potrjujejo istrsko dedno zasnovo kulinarskih ekspertov in so tiste, ki so ekspertom v času odraščanja predale svoje "avtentično" znanje, svojo kulturo. Bogat kulturni kapital je podprt tudi s strani medijev, ki potrjujejo, da so kulinarski eksperti res zmožni presoje o tem, kaj je okusno.*

*Po mnenju terenskih sogovornikov je prehrana sredstvo, ki lahko Istri omogoči korak naprej, z oporo nazaj, v smer tradicije, narave in izgubljenega raja. Eksperti istrske hrane so tisti, ki kot pravijo sami, dobro poznajo istrsko kulinariko in uživajo istrsko hrano. S tem nastopajo kot strokovna elita, ki lahko razloči kvalitetno od nekvalitetnega, pri čemer ne gre le za sposobnost presojanja hrane, temveč tudi za širšo možnost razločevanja dobrega od slabega. Kljub pestrosti diskurzov, ki sem jih med etnografskim delom zaznala, pa razbiram homogenost trendov znotraj regije, saj ima kulturni kapital kulinarskih ekspertov podobne korenine, ki poznavalcem podeljujejo poseben družbeni status.*

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