

ELEVATING THE LOWLY DUMPLING: FROM PEASANT KITCHENS TO PRESS CONFERENCES

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Dumplings may be a simple food prepared in Central European kitchens and the object of publicity campaigns to draw culinary tourists to particular regions. Around the world, dumplings can be both a celebratory meal and a way to stretch meager ingredients with tiny bits of meat tucked into larger quantities of cheaper ingredients like wheat flour or potatoes. The Austrian dumpling exemplifies some of the ways that relatively cheap ingredients become both strikingly symbolic and profoundly filling. Scholarly attention to dumplings promises insights that connect the cultural and the culinary, and the many ways that simple foods are also complex. (Food culture, dumplings, Austria, regional promotion)

In September 2005, the agricultural minister of Upper Austria (a province bordering Bavaria) called a press conference to announce a campaign bringing attention to the dumplings of Upper Austria as a tourist attraction, and as an alternative to pizza and hamburgers. He also announced the appointment of a “Dumpling Manager” to oversee a campaign to increase the visibility and availability of dumplings (<http://ooe.orf.at/stories//59042>). Dumplings were to place Upper Austria on the culinary map, enticing visitors to the region, and drawing them into restaurants across the province. But how could lumps of boiled dough warrant their own press conference, not to mention the sense that they somehow conveyed enough of a regional identity to act as a “round ambassador” for the province?

Dumplings themselves, of course, are worth a book on their own. Found around the world, they can be both a celebratory meal and a way to stretch meager ingredients with tiny bits of meat tucked into larger quantities of cheaper ingredients like wheat flour or potatoes. The Austrian dumpling exemplifies some of the ways that relatively cheap ingredients become both strikingly symbolic and profoundly filling. There are three primary lessons to be learned from these Austrian dumplings that suddenly found themselves in the limelight and warranting press conferences.

First, a dumpling, like many other foods, is ripe for both powerful symbolism and changing meanings. The meanings invested in dumplings, as with other foods, may vary from the very private level of a kind of Proustian remembrance from childhood, to dumplings as symbols of regions or nations, as objects of fading nostalgia, or active entrepreneurial campaigns to boost the economies and external identities of particular regions. Like many foods, including the Vietnamese New Year rice cakes (*banh Tet*) (Avieli 2005), dumplings are polyvalent, capable of invoking or bearing multiple and even contradictory meanings. When they change

in meaning, dumplings like other foods can become the screens on which meanings are projected, as well as the vehicles for the consumption of particular messages. Such changes have been charted for a variety of cultural objects, as with Becker (1984) on art, DeNora (1991) on the music of Beethoven, and with food in particular (see Fantasia [1995] on McDonald's in France and Ferguson [1998] on the creation of French haute cuisine). With the hard work of culinary entrepreneurs, humble foods like the dumpling may shift in meaning and status, to become a sign of plenty or poverty, but it is unlikely that they will ever be haute cuisine.¹

A second dumpling lesson is that the dumpling is an example of a homemade and relatively inexpensive food that nonetheless has broad cross-class appeal. While dumplings at times can have something luxurious about them, as with rolling carts full of steaming dim sum and great platters of empanadas, they also are clearly a response to tough times, when savory dumplings are a way to stretch a bit of hardly edible meat into a filling meal. Thus this article charts some of this vacillation between poverty and plenty, and between home cooking and public consumption.

Third, the dumpling also has a complex geopolitical history, a story of simultaneous rootedness and mobility. The tale encompasses the raw materials of food (such as potatoes or wheat), of people, of the shifting borders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the movement of people across the surface of the earth. People, food, recipes, appetites, habits, cooking pots, cookbooks, even monastery gardens, circulate and spread the word about culinary and horticultural trends, as do travelers and immigrants. Various dumpling histories cite the centrality of Bohemia as a dumpling homeland, from which Central European dumpling culture radiated outward. Further, the dumpling promotion campaign mentioned above is part of a much larger movement in Europe, and much of the rest of the world, that uses food to brand particular places and uses particular places to brand particular foods.

The importance of food in constructing identity has received some scholarly attention, but Avieli and others find this to still be an understudied but very promising direction of inquiry. In his study of the Vietnamese *banh Tet*, the rice cake Avieli (2005:167) calls a "culinary artifact," made especially for the New Year's celebration, he explores the complex relationship between a single cake and shifting national and regional identities. *Banh Tet* itself consists of "sticky-rice loaves stuffed with green beans and fatty pork, wrapped in bamboo leaves, and boiled overnight . . . the preparation of *banh Tet* is not difficult, yet requires time, labor, equipment, and some experience. Therefore, most urban families buy them in any of the several outlets that spring up everywhere in the week prior to the festival" (Avieli 2005:172). That "most urban families buy" the rice cakes rather than prepare them at home is fascinating and calls into question some common presumptions and the fetishization of home cooking, especially women's home cooking. Throughout the world, street food is a perfectly acceptable source of nourishment, and much of the day's calories are acquired outside the home, even on such a holiday.

It should not be surprising that even something as symbolic nationally as the *banh Tet* can show affinities with other East Asian culinary styles, for it clearly has

Chinese influences, at the very least in the soy sauce in which they are dipped, rather than the more traditional Vietnamese fish sauce. Banh Tet are considered a means of distinction, “standing for an independent, pre-Chinese Vietnamese culture (the shaky grounds for this claim notwithstanding) . . . what must further be explored is the nature of the difference,” which Avieli (2005:180) finds in the fact that these cakes were preserved and used as war rations. Intriguingly, the banh Tet themselves can be simultaneously a highly resonant symbol distinguishing Vietnamese from Chinese culture, but the variations in the banh Tet shapes also speak to deep-seated differences between regions within Vietnam itself. “Vietnamese nationalism, when shaped into banh Tet, is not abstract but substantial, and when the cakes are digested, the nation becomes physically embodied by its subjects [and banh Tet are also] exceptionally dynamic, flexible, and multivocal, managing to convey varied and, at times, contradicting ideas that reveal much about the ways in which contemporary Vietnamese think about themselves” (Avieli 2005:183). Thus the simple substances of rice, green beans, and bits of fatty pork become deeply symbolic, boiled politics and cooked culture, and part of a high stakes set of struggles about meanings and power as nations and regions are mapped onto lunch and dinner.

It is impossible to do full justice to dumpling diversity in a single article, so this essay follows Avieli’s call to look more closely at the meaning and power of food in general, and dumplings in particular, centering on the dumplings of Central Europe (with a particular emphasis on Austria, site of my own dumpling education) to generate some thoughts on the dumpling as a polyvalent cultural entity, and as a culinary response to either hard times or good times, depending on what’s inside and outside the dumpling.

HOME COOKING

On a summer day in an Austrian village I was visiting, I experienced firsthand many key dumpling qualities—affordability, home cooking, and rootedness (although dumplings are not as deeply rooted as they may seem). My hostess, a gifted cook, makes a kind of dumpling that is difficult, if not impossible, to recreate beyond the village perimeter. Indeed, even in the next valley over, this dumpling is unknown. The name, *Bratknödel*, is widely used, and many different culinary creations go by that name. But her unique mixture of meat, fat, and dumpling dough has deep roots in this particular place. One morning when I was visiting, she sent me across the street to the butcher’s shop with specific instructions to get the filling for the dumplings, and pressed a five Euro bill into my hand (about \$7 at the time, and not much for grocery shopping).

I went across a narrow street, watching out for the ancient tractors on their way to other fields and new semis that barrel through the heart of the village. The butcher shop is a co-op that sells meat from local animals slaughtered up the road at a tiny abattoir. Its meat is of exceptionally good quality, a quality that would cost dearly

in Chicago, New York, or even Vienna, but there it is quite affordable, and unparalleled in its freshness, its carbon footprint, and its humaneness.

The butcher shop is not the kind of charming bucolic place one might expect in such a village, nor does it have any of the feel of other stores that might focus on local, organic, or slow food. In fact it is fairly sterile, with brown tiles and fixtures reminiscent of a moment in the 1970s when the butcher shop must have been renovated in a great fit of modernization. My hostess told me to try to be waited on by the plumper of the two women behind the counter, because she is most familiar with my hostess's culinary needs, in particular the right kind of *Bratknödelbrat*, a mixture of pork and *Kernfett*, a cheap, chunky pork fat. When done correctly, the balance of meat and fat causes the dumplings to create their own sauce deep inside the dough as they boil on top of the stove. They are eaten on a plate with a fork, and when the fork squishes into the dumpling, the spices mixed into the meat have colored the melted fat and meat juices into a rich orange-red, and the juices run out onto the plate and mingle with the accompanying sauerkraut. They are not unlike the Shanghai dumplings that have the soup on the inside rather than the outside. The dumplings must be perfectly formed and hermetically sealed or the shimmery sauce will leak into the pot, leaving telltale signs of poorly rolled dumplings in the form of red-orange slicks of spiced fat floating in the boiling water.

At the butcher shop, I asked for the right number of grams of *Bratknödelbrat*, and a bag of sauerkraut. The clerk turned to the meat grinder behind her and fed handfuls of meat into it. Then she turned and asked me a question I did not understand. I smiled helplessly, and blurted out, "It's for . . .," referencing the name of my host. She nodded and added a generous hunk of white fat to the mix, clearly knowing the particular recipe used for *Bratknödel* at that particular house. She wrapped the ground meat in a plastic bag, scooped sauerkraut from a large tub into another plastic bag, took the five Euros, and returned quite a bit of change. (This was a cheap meal!)

Meanwhile my hostess had been at home, mixing pale dough for the dumplings, mostly white flour with a bit of oil, egg, and salt. The dough for these particular dumplings is nearly identical to the dough for apple strudel, but pinched and rolled into dumplings rather than stretched thin across the kitchen table. Such white flour is a staple of Central European cuisine, with slight variations (*griffig*, rough, or *glatt*, smooth), and essential for the production of most dumplings. What makes this food so good is not necessarily the quality of the individual ingredients (*kernfett* is pretty difficult to eat on its own) so much as the skill and, even more importantly, the time put into preparation.

The big meal of the day in this old house is traditionally at midday, as in much of Central Europe, so the gathering, chopping, rolling, and cooking for the midday meal has to happen soon after the morning roll and coffee. My hostess had me mix the meat and fat with handfuls of paprika, pepper, salt, chopped onions, and other flavorings, and then we stood in the kitchen, tucking hunks of the ground meat into little jackets of creamy white dough. It is a kind of habitus, not only the tacit knowledge of the unwritten recipe, but also the experience to judge when the texture is

right (not too dry or too moist) to hold up in a pot of boiling water, and to know the feel of a well-sealed Bratknödel that will act as a perfect, spherical container for the melting fat and spices inside, only revealed at the table with the jab of a fork. This meal, while inexpensive, took a lot of time to prepare. Taking the time to make Bratknödel means less time for other things, like employment for wages. Because of the time it takes to make dumplings from scratch, many people satisfy their dumpling appetites by turning to the supermarket freezer section, or to the boxes of dried dumpling mixes. The freezer section of an Austrian supermarket contains an abundant selection of frozen dumplings, both savory and sweet, sold by the bagful or in little cardboard boxes, but most are fairly dull compared with those in that village kitchen in Upper Austria.

BETWEEN POVERTY AND PLENTY

Dumplings speak simultaneously of poverty and plenty. They are a way of turning stale bread or hunks of pork fat into a filling, flavorful meal, and can be physically and even emotionally nourishing. Dumplings in Central Europe are typically made by women at home, and require a fair amount of work, so sitting down to a plate full of dumplings often implies female labor in the background. While they have their origin in home cooking, dumpling production is becoming increasingly industrialized, and available in public places like grocery stores, farmer's markets, and restaurants.

In the Czech Republic, dumplings are a very important element of national and culinary identity. "Meat and dumpling based dishes are not only associated with the traditional and Czech, they are also associated with a certain kind of masculinity involving notions of male strength" (Haukanes 2003:n.p.). Women, who tend to do the cooking in the Bohemian countryside, say that men expect meat and dumplings as often as possible, but to make dumplings, meat, and gravy dishes is time-consuming and not easy. Younger and urban women Haukanes (2003) interviewed often did not know how to make the dumplings, and resorted (sometimes with embarrassment) to ready-made dumplings. Thus the meaning and consumption of dumplings is in transition alongside changes in gender roles and workday schedules for, as in Austria, the big meal of the day in the Czech Republic is at midday, requiring one or two hours of preparation in the morning—quite difficult to manage with a normal work schedule.

Boxed potato powders, *Semmelknödel* (bread crumb dumplings) in dumpling shaped plastic bags, and cellophane sacks full of bread crumbs and printed with a dumpling recipe, speak to the demands of people without a steady supply of stale rolls, and without a recipe committed to memory. The multinational company Unilever even offers a brief history of the dumpling on its website (<http://www.unilever.de/ourbrands/cookingandeating/mehrartikel/knoedel.asp>), since a branch of the company produces cooked dumplings in various forms.

The Upper Austrian campaign to raise dumpling awareness also entailed bringing them onto the menus of the better restaurants, presumably by more male chefs rather than female “cooks.” Alternately, a cookbook put together as a benefit for a Viennese homeless shelter, and intentionally full of recipes that could be made by shelter residents (i.e., meals costing less than five Euros to make), is full of dumpling recipes. It includes a recipe for potato dumplings stuffed with bits of blood sausage and one for bacon dumplings made of day-old rolls and a little bacon. In these recipes the meat is more of a seasoning rather than the heart of the dish.

On Food and Cooking (McGee 2004) offers little information on dumplings, but does include some references to Chinese dumplings as a sign of wealth and good taste, rather than as the food of the poor. “Around 300 CE, Shu Xi wrote an ode to wheat products (*bing*) that names several kinds of noodles and dumplings, describes how they’re made, and suggests their luxurious qualities” (McGee 2004:571). “Noodles—*mian* or *mein*—and filled dumplings began in the north as luxury foods for the ruling class. They gradually became staples of the working class, with dumplings retaining the suggestion of prosperity, and spread to the south around the twelfth century” (McGee 2004:572).

Thus dumplings bounce (figuratively) around the scale of socioeconomic status, and vary on the plate from side to center, and on the menu from soup to dessert. They clearly suggest origins in a simple form of cooking—a dough that generally does not need to rise (with a few exceptions, like the *Germknödel*), combining small quantities of meat or cheese and larger quantities of cheaper or more easily accessible ingredients like wheat flour, semolina, and potatoes. Certainly they express home cooking rather than haute cuisine, but there are efforts to elevate dumplings (and many other homemade countryside products) to the point where they are served not only in backyards and family kitchens but also in fine restaurants and in fashionable resort areas.

Dumplings can be appreciated in part from the perspective of the sociology of culture, in particular the sociology of art and the various takes on aesthetics and taste (e.g., Becker 1984; Bourdieu 1984; DeNora 1991; Ferguson 1998; Jordan 2007). That is, dumplings, like heirloom tomatoes and heritage turkeys, can take on dramatically different meanings and symbols, and like heirloom tomatoes and Beethoven sonatas, can also be aesthetic objects, things to be looked at for pleasure, enjoyed when listened to, or when tasted. However, the aesthetic perceptions of these objects vary not only with their material composition and biological proclivities, but also by the cultural baggage with which the aesthetic object is approached; i.e., learning to see the dumpling as representative of motherly love, or regional identity, or poverty, or wealth, for example.

A DUMPLING LEXICON

The English language is ill-suited to handle the German words for dumplings. *Nockerln*, *Spätzle*, *Knödel*, *Kloss*, *Klösschen*, *Buchteln*, *Krapfen* (which are

sometimes like fritters or crullers, but at other times more closely resemble ravioli), *Taschen*, and *Tascherln* are just the beginning. Many dumplings are named for their place of origin, but even in these cases the actual recipes may vary by family, village, valley, or region. The words also reflect language differences (German, Austrian, Bohemian, Bavarian), and to the well-trained ear and palate may imply differences of shape or substance. Many sources cite Bohemia (today part of the Czech Republic) as the point of origin for much of the Central European dumpling culture. “From Skubank (skubánky, Zupfnudeln) all the way to Dalken (*vdolky*, from *vdolek*, small hollow, which refers to the necessary *Mulden* or *Dalkenpfanne* (similar to a muffin tin)). Among the Bohemian *Mehlspeisen* Buchteln (Wuchteln), Liwanzen (a type of Palatschinke with yeast), and Golatschen or Kolatschen (from *kolác*, cake) have found a common ally in the form of Powidl (a thick jam of stewed prunes)” (Etzlstorfer 2006:322). (*Mehlspeisen* is the Austrian word to refer to a whole realm of foods somewhere between full-on dessert and breakfast, everything from sweet dumplings to palatschinken to strudels—generally anything that requires flour, but not necessarily cake or cookies.)

Clearly, a lot of linguistic complexity is present, and it is nearly impossible to accurately translate into English the full spectrum of words for things that fall under the umbrella term “dumpling.” Things get even more complicated in light of the fact that the same word may describe very different physical entities, and that the same physical entity may be called by different words. There are also lexical border regions, where both the words and the physical entities threaten to finally become something else (a blintz, pancake, doughnut, or pasta) yet still cling to the family of words and recipes associated with dumplings.

In addition to (and in part actually causing) this linguistic diversity and confusion is the sheer heterogeneity of dumplings themselves—even if only examining those today classified as Austrian or Central European (not to mention the astonishing global dumpling diversity). In the introduction to a tiny dumpling cookbook, Tietz (2003) writes:

. . . from rustic to elegant, from big (like a tennis ball) to delicate and small (like a cherry), presented in bowls, on plates or platters Whether prepared from raw or boiled potatoes, from flour or semolina, day-old rolls, meat, quark [somewhere between cottage cheese, sour cream, and cream cheese; referred to as Topfen in Austria], or yeast, furnished with fine fillings, packed into napkins as so-called “large” dumplings or as a “cozy” accompaniment to delicious, crispy, and hearty roasts—they are irresistible (Tietz 2003:6–7, my translation)

In her overview of dumplings, she includes not only the savory varieties, but also sweet ones: “Cherries, apricots, apples, pears, plums, blueberries, strawberries, poppy seeds or buttermilk Marillen dumplings, cream cheese dumplings, milk dumplings . . .” (Tietz 2003:7, my translation).

Thus while much about dumplings defies precise categorization or definition, it is at least possible to distinguish between sweet and savory dumplings. Savory may be served in a soup, as a side dish or, as in the case of Bratknödel, as a main course.

Sweet dumplings are by no means limited to dessert, and belong to the broad category of flour-based foods that can be meals unto themselves. Blind dumplings are those without filling. Liver dumplings (*Leberknödel*) are a way of serving a piece of liver that may not be good on its own—a bit of beef liver (preferably ground by a butcher, according to one cookbook) mixed with stale breadcrumbs, onion, parsley, a little butter, an egg, and some spices. These dumplings are served floating in a rich broth, and are extremely filling.

There are debates regarding the geographic origins of savory dumplings. “The classic Dumpling province is Tyrol with its great variety of bacon, spinach, or cheese (*Kaspressknödeln*), that are used as a side dish and eaten in soup . . .” (Etzlstorfer 2006:367, my translation).

In Upper Austria, the proximity to Bohemia and Bavaria shapes the menu, which contains many dumpling dishes. Dumplings appear just as often as a side dish for savory dishes like *Geselchtes* and Cabbage as meat dumplings, crackling dumplings, ground meat dumplings, or fruit dumplings (primarily the Italian plum [Zwetschke], domestic plum, as well as greengages). The culinary skills of a cook are often measured by her ability to prepare dumplings. (Etzlstorfer 2006:363, my translation)

Dumplings may have bits of meat in them that many people would be unlikely to eat on their own. *Bratknödelbrat* is not simply a meatball by another name and would be unappetizing without the alchemy of dough and boiling water. Generally, dumplings do not contain bits of tenderloin or other fine cuts—there is no point. Dumplings are a way of masking tough or fatty meat in a cloak of starch based on white flour or potatoes, and very often served with another inexpensive but nourishing food, like cabbage. *Grammelknödel* are a potato dough surrounding fried cracklings that create a sticky, sweet gravy inside the protective layer of potato and are reminiscent of Chinese steamed pork buns.

Dumpling cookbooks may contain recipes for bone marrow dumplings (marrow mixed with breadcrumbs, an egg, and milk, then quickly boiled). Some recipes are simply pockets of dough stuffed with brain, or bread dumplings stuffed with sausage. There are Carinthian Cheese Noodles (*Kärntner Kasnudeln*), which qualify as dumplings, although they come close to being very hefty ravioli. One cookbook opens the *Kasnudeln* recipes with an anecdote about the importance of a woman’s ability to make them to attract a man. These dumplings require an especially skilled hand for creating a crimped, ruffled edge to the big stuffed pockets. They can be filled with a mixture of breadcrumbs and *Topfen*, onions, potatoes, and mint, or with *Topfen* and spinach.

Kartoffelknödel (the German version) or *Erdäpfelknödel* (the Austrian version) can be made with a powdered mix in a box, or with a couple of boiled floury potatoes, milled and mixed with eggs, flour, and semolina. Potato dumplings can be stuffed with ground beef, veal, pork, cracklings, or apricots. Spinach dumplings turn into massive dark-green balls, stuffed and topped with white cheese. Dumplings can also (albeit more rarely) be filled with lamb, pork, goose, chanterelles, venison

liver, venison, and chestnuts. A key difference between *Knödel* and *Taschen* or *Tascherl* seems to be shape. *Knödel* are round (and generally have a thicker dough flattened by hand), whereas pockets (or *Tascherl*) are often half-moon shaped, with a thinner, rolled dough.

Dumplings are also a way of extending food without the use of preservatives. With Semmelknödel, there is a progression from the stale rock-hard Kaiser rolls that home cooks keep in their pantries (waiting until there are enough to make a batch of dumplings), to the dumplings themselves, served freshly made alongside a slice of some kind of roasted meat, to the dish served with leftover dumplings (much better when the dumplings have been drying out for a few days), *geröstete Knödel*, Semmelknödel cut into thick slices revealing the layers of bread crumbs, fried in some oil and butter with soft onions, and served with scrambled eggs and parsley. This cheap, filling dish is available in restaurants throughout Vienna and generally listed as vegetarian. Even with Semmelknödel, dumplings with the same name may vary significantly in ingredients or techniques of preparation.

The classic ingredients include dried bread cubes, butter, eggs, milk, flour, onions and chopped parsley, which any housewife uses in different proportions. Also in terms of preparation, one distinguishes between two “Semmelknödelschulen” [bread dumpling schools]: that in which the bread cubes are soaked in milk and eggs and only then mixed with flour and formed, and the other, in which the bread cubes are first fried with butter and onions and then formed with flour, eggs, and milk. (Pernkopf and Wagner 2007:92, my translation)

Some Semmelknödel recipes call for a bit of porkfat, but they are often made with no meat (although an egg or two is used to bind the mass together). *Nockerl* and *Spätzle* are another category frequently available in down-to-earth restaurants. *Spätzle* are tiny dumplings, not stuffed with anything but put through a Spätzle sieve or slid off of a cutting board with the back of a knife, dropped in boiling water, and often served with bits of bacon, eggs, and/or cheese. *Griessnockerl* are made of semolina (as the name indicates) flour, eggs, and butter, and often appear in bowls of broth.

Many blind dumplings in Central Europe are meant to serve as an accompaniment to meat, and each dumpling has its appropriate style of meat. I once made the mistake of serving potato dumplings with a caraway pork roast and braised red cabbage instead of goose, which is a more traditional accompaniment to that combination of dumpling and cabbage. There are also recent trends toward more herb- or vegetable-infused dumplings. My Upper Austrian cookbook includes *Bärlauchnockerln*, small dumplings like gnocchi made from ramson or wild garlic (only available for a brief period in the spring, before it gets too old and slightly poisonous) mixed with the usual combination of eggs, Topfen, potatoes, flour, and bread crumbs.

A favorite Austrian fruit dumpling is the *Marillknödel*, which uses apricots. The cook pops the pit out of a ripe apricot with a finger or the handle of a wooden spoon, fills the void with a sugar cube or a lump of marzipan, then wraps the apricot

in a layer of floury potato dough. The dumpling is boiled and served in browned bread crumbs and butter, with a sprinkling of sugar. Sometimes they serve as a mid-day meal, particularly on warm summer days.

There are many varieties of the Salzburger *Nockerl*, a massive dessert that looks very little like a dumpling, despite its name. In one of his cookbooks, star Austrian cook Ewald Plachutta and cookbook author Christoph Wagner (1993:508) warn that “the success of the Salzburger dumpling [which can be as big as a lasagna] demands precision, a greaseless cold ‘Schneekessel’ [a bowl for whipping egg whites, referred to as *Schnee* or snow], as well as quick action.” There are also capuchin dumplings, yeast dumplings, and tiny snow dumplings made from whipped egg whites dropped in boiling water.

HOME COOKING OR HAUTE CUISINE

An article titled “A Round Ambassador for Upper Austria” asserts that “Upper Austria is the kingdom of dumplings.”² This “round ambassador,” no matter how it is arranged on a plate, simply does not look like haute cuisine. Dumplings may be served (and photographed) whole as glistening orbs, or sliced down the middle to reveal the stuffing, or artfully arranged as perfectly styled delicate slices of bread dumplings, draped with strips of omelet and a dusting of herbs. As an Upper Austrian cookbook concludes, “the dumpling lends itself perfectly to being a culinary trademark” (Pernkopf and Wagner 2007:95). In 2005, the state of Upper Austria held a press conference with the heading “The Dumpling Represents Upper Austria on the Plate.” The humble dumpling was tapped to represent an entire province to the outside world, a way to bolster gastronomy and tourism and draw visitors to Upper Austria in search of culinary pleasures. The publicity campaign is an attempt to elevate the rank of the dumpling, to pull it out of the kitchen and onto the dinner tables of tourists and into the kitchens of professional chefs, but also to market a very *bodenständig* (down-to-earth) cuisine.

The “Genussland Oberösterreich” sets a significant landmark on the culinary map of Europe: In the future the dumpling is to stand for Upper Austria like pizza for Italy or chocolate for Switzerland. Upper Austria is the kingdom of dumplings. Finds in remnants of the Mondsee pile dwellings prove that already 3,000 years ago dumplings were prepared here and also today dumplings are still regularly served on Upper Austrian plates as hors d’oeuvre, main course, or dessert. So what would more suggest itself than making the dumpling the symbol of the “Genussland Oberösterreich” and the ambassador of good taste? With the dumpling Upper Austria is to receive a clear culinary profile. “Who thinks of Italy, thinks of pizza, who thinks of Upper Austria, is to think also of the dumpling in the future,” Agriculture Councillor Stockinger says at the presentation of the initiative on 19 September. An official “dumpling manager” now takes care that the Upper Austrian dumpling is established on the culinary map of Europe. (<http://www.genussland.at/produkte/oberoesterreich-schmankerl/1106603/knoedel.html>)

The press kits and cookbooks repeat the stories, the archaeological origins, and regional credit-taking. “Culinary archaeology dates its first ‘Dumpling’ find (at the

very least a ‘dough find’) to the Neolithic piling dwelling villages established along the Mondsee (a lake in Upper Austria) between 2500 and 1800 B.C.” (Plachutta and Wagner 1993:398, my translation).

The various promotion materials reach the public in print form, on television and radio, on the Internet, in cookbooks, public events, and cooking demonstrations at farmers’ markets. They teach how to make dumplings, and spread messages about dumpling history and geography. “The primary realm of the dumpling is Upper Austria and Bavaria, as well as southern Bohemia, Tyrol, and South Tyrol, which also belong, in culinary terms, to the territory of the dumpling. Their distinguishing feature is their round form, but of course the exception is always the rule. The word ‘Knödel’ was originally a diminutive form of the middle high German ‘knode’ for ‘knot.’” Other words for dumplings include Czech *knedlik* or *knedlicek*, and *Kloss* or *Klöße* in northern and western Germany.

“Naked” varieties are those that don’t have an outer coating of toasted bread crumbs, like crackling dumplings out of potato dough. “Blind” dumplings are those that may be rolled in buttered toasted bread crumbs but have no filling. Sweet cheese dumplings belong to this category. Yeast dumplings with stewed plum filling constitute an exception in that they are not boiled, but rather slowly allowed to rise over hot steam. (<http://www.genussland.at/produkte/oberoesterreich-schmankerl/1106603/knoedel.html>, my translation)

“A longing for regionalism in a globalizing world” reads the headline of one of the 2005 press releases. Here the stations of the farmers’ market dumpling projects are mentioned as well, explaining to children and adults with hands-on demonstrations the many, many tricks of the trade, from being sure to properly flour the work surface to knowing how not to put in too much filling. In 2006 Austrian state television (ORF) ran an episode of the show “*Aufgegabelt in Österreich*,” shot in Upper Austria and titled “From Dumplings, Roasts, and Linzer Torte—Culinary Upper Austria.” Part of this campaign was certainly meant to encourage dining away from home, taking something from the home kitchen and putting it in public places. One element of the 2006 campaign involved a partnership with Lufthansa, including putting blood sausage dumplings on the menu of first-class flights, and also providing lists of chefs preparing dumplings in elegant restaurants across the province. In these campaigns dumplings came to embody, to some extent, national or regional identity, but there was also often something tongue-in-cheek about how people talk about dumplings. As much as people may adore them, they are also treated with less gravity than, say, foie gras or parmeggiano reggiano.

DUMPLINGS, GEOPOLITICS, AND CULINARY PLACE-MAKING

In response to the forces of globalization and the expansion of the European Union, with its attendant regulations, restrictions, and standards, many scholars, farmers, food processors, and gourmets perceive these changes as potentially homogenizing and a threat to the diversity of European cuisine. One response is the

phenomenon of culinary place-making, intentionally assigning or exposing narratives of particular foods with the intention of strengthening local or regional economies. As a result, “rural and urban areas in western Europe—as elsewhere—are increasingly adopting cultural markers as key resources in the pursuit of territorial development objectives [and there is an unprecedented turn to the local, where] the range of markers includes traditional foods, regional languages, crafts, folklore, local visual arts and drama, literary references, historical and prehistoric sites, landscape systems and their associated flora and fauna” (Ray 1998:3–4). In search of visitors and customers, tourism offices, vintners, hoteliers, and restaurateurs have promoted local and regional identities through food and through concepts like terroir, DOC, etc. There is as yet no protected status for dumplings as there is for everything from Cognac to Champagne, Portuguese honey to Polish cheese, but culinary place-marketing is definitely a strategy many regional governments and chambers of commerce or agricultural boards are embracing. Fundamental to this work is crafting or coalescing narratives that make food recognizable and unique, which clearly took place at the dumpling press conference.

The dumpling is a deeply rooted part of folk culture and, like many other culinary objects, resonates with a profound sense of local identity. The Bratknödel mentioned above, for example, should in no way be confused with the dumplings from the next valley over. On the other hand, dumplings are found globally, and many of them have been influenced and even invigorated by cultivars that have been exchanged from one part of the world to another (cf. Plotnicov and Scaglione 2002). Dumplings now firmly understood to be Austrian can be made with potato flour, a New World product, and particularly with floury potatoes that lend themselves to a quick turn through the potato ricer and a fluffy consistency. Austrian dumplings also have a lot of Bohemian heritage, and surely Bohemian dumpling culture did not simply spring full-grown from the Czech countryside.

OTHER DUMPLINGS, OTHER PLACES

Dumplings are hardly on a par with haute cuisine or other complex culinary traditions, and there is much humor and self-deprecation in the culinary writing on dumplings. The Austrian dumpling is one place to continue what should be an ongoing academic conversation about both the symbolism and the physicality of food, the spatiality and meaning of cooking and eating. The dumpling itself surely warrants further investigation. The dumpling gets frequent mention in the *New York Times* restaurant reviews, the majority in reference to dumplings at Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Asian fusion restaurants. Interestingly, there is just a handful of references to home cooked dumplings (a recipe here and there), but overwhelmingly newspaper coverage related to dumplings is centered on restaurants, shops, and on the production and consumption of dumplings outside the home. The dumpling is a favorite of fusion restaurants, lending itself well to palates in search of exotic but comforting foods. It is ubiquitous in the American South, in Jewish,

Russian, and Polish cooking and, of course, it is an essential culinary creation in China, Japan, and countless other places. Scholarly attention to dumplings promises further insights into the connections between the cultural and the culinary, and the many ways that the simplest foods can also be powerfully complex.

NOTES

1. There are rare exceptions, such as the dumplings served at Jean-Georges Vongerichten's New York restaurant, 66, where foie gras dumplings made an appearance on the menu.
2. "A round ambassador for Upper Austria." Lebensministerium Öffentlichkeitsarbeit. Aug. 08, 2006. <http://www.lebensmittelnet.at/article/articleview/48280/1/11170/> (accessed June 5, 2008).

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