

Gourmandizing Poverty Food: The Serpa Cheese Slow Food Presidium

HARRY G. WEST AND NUNO DOMINGOS

This paper examines a Slow Food–sponsored project to recreate and promote Serpa Velho, a hard aged cheese historically produced in the Alentejo region of Portugal. The authors examine the historical forces behind three changes that the project sought to reverse, namely the abandonment by cheese makers of the Merino breed, the move away from aging the cheese on straw mats in the cheese room rafters to aging in refrigerated stores, and the sale of younger, softer cheeses. The authors contend that the pursuit of these aims by the project ironically contradicts Slow Food’s stated aims of fostering the production of food that is ‘good, clean and fair’. The paper concludes not only that more rigorous historical analysis exposes Slow Food’s romanticism and elitism, but also that such analysis is necessary to the improvement of the food we eat.

Keywords: Slow Food, Serpa, Alentejo, heritage foods, transhumance, cheese

THE SERPA CHEESE PRESIDIUM

Among the newcomers in the ‘presidium’ section at the sixth edition of Slow Food’s international exhibition, *Cheese* – held in Bra, Italy, on 21–24 September 2007 – were representatives of *Queijo Serpa* (Serpa cheese) from the Alentejo region of Portugal. In a small, refrigerated deli-counter, framed by banners picturing, naming, describing and contextualizing the product, sat several cheeses. On the counter-top were tidy stacks of brochures, in English and in Portuguese, categorizing Serpa as ‘a raw sheep’s milk cheese made with cardoon rennet’. Serpa delegates invited passers-by to taste the cheese. Some lingered to learn more about its makers and their presidium project.

Cheese is a biennial event providing caseophiles from around the world an opportunity collectively to celebrate the craft of artisan cheese making.¹ Inaugurated in 1997 in response to the threat of new European Union (EU) regulations that would have prohibited the production and sale of raw milk products, *Cheese* has been among the most visible Slow Food initiatives. The parent organization, Slow Food, was founded in 1986, and conceives of itself more broadly

Harry G. West, Professor of Anthropology and Chair of the Food Studies Centre, SOAS, University of London, Thornhaugh Street, London WC1H 0XG, UK. E-mail: harry.west@soas.ac.uk; Nuno Domingos, Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Instituto de Ciências Sociais da Universidade de Lisboa, Avenida Professor Aníbal de Bettencourt, 9, 1600-189 Lisboa, Portugal. E-mail: nuno.domingos@ics.ul.pt

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¹ The 2007 edition of *Cheese* showcased hundreds of cheese producers, as well as hundreds of vendors, and offered 33 taste workshops. It was attended by more than 150,000 people, among them food writers, restaurateurs, food tourists and ordinary consumers from the Piedmont region and beyond.

as a response to global consumerism, especially in the form of 'fast food'. Its founder and president, Carlo Petrini, has long argued the compatibility – indeed, the interdependence – of radical politics and the pursuit of pleasure (Andrews 2008, 3–28). Whereas, according to Petrini, global consumerism reduces everything, including human sustenance, to the commodity form and, through the rationalization of production, contributes to the homogenization of tastes and the elimination of gastronomic, cultural and ecological diversity, Slow Food has sought to protect traditional foodways from the erosive force of the global market place (Petrini 2001). Slow Food argues that everyone benefits from 'good food' – from the 'producers' who derive their livelihoods from growing, preparing and/or serving it, to the 'co-producers' (the term Slow Food prefers over 'consumers') who, beyond merely consuming it, participate in its reproduction and preservation by making informed and ethical choices and by paying its true value.

Central to Slow Food's battle against the 'homogenization of taste' since 2000 have been its presidia, created to defend foods 'at risk of disappearance'. By 2007, more than 250 presidia had been created. Nearly 200 of these were located in Italy, but presidia had also been formed in over 30 other countries. Slow Food takes pride in the way presidia have contributed to the preservation of biodiversity and the promotion of sustainable farming through the protection of heritage breeds and threatened ecosystems, among other things (Fernald et al. 2004, 9–10). According to Slow Food, a presidium 'tells consumers all around the world about [an] extraordinary product and that seeking it out, buying it and tasting it is well worth the effort'. This it accomplishes by 'present[ing] presidia foods as a way to understand the history and traditions of a place and to preserve gastronomic culture' (Fernald et al. 2004, 12).

Some 50 booths representing artisan cheese presidia lined the streets of Bra at *Cheese 2007*. When we stopped to talk with the Serpa delegates, they also explained their aims. As stated in their brochure, Serpa cheese already enjoyed status as a 'Protected Designation of Origin' (PDO) product.² However, PDO criteria were not sufficiently strict to protect what the Serpa Cheese Presidium (hereafter, the Presidium) organizers considered 'the traditional version of Serpa cheese'. Whereas the cheese had been made, historically, from the milk of 'local' Merino sheep, it was now made 'predominantly' from the milk of Lacaune, a breed originating in France. Whereas it had been aged, in the past, on reed mats in the rafters of the cheese room, it was now aged in refrigerated stores. And whereas it had previously been aged for as long as 6 months, until firm – even hard – and dry, it was now generally sold and consumed young and soft – even eaten by some with a spoon. According to the Presidium brochure, '[The now] rarer type of Serpa (firm and semi-firm) is markedly more interesting with more complex sensory qualities and personality.' Local taste preferences confirmed this, according to Presidium organizers, but the industrialization of Serpa production in recent decades had corrupted the cheese beyond recognition. The Presidium intended to address this problem by assisting a select group of producers who would (continue to) make Serpa as it used to be made – *Serpa Velho* (Old Serpa) as they called it.³

² Building upon country-specific 'geographical indication' regimes such as the French *Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée* (AOC), the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) scheme grants EU-wide exclusive rights to the use of certain place names to producers who can demonstrate that products made in such places, and in accordance with well-defined productive criteria, possess distinctive characteristics.

³ Rather than fighting to amend PDO specifications for Serpa, Presidium organizers hoped to define *Serpa Velho* as a sub-category of Serpa and to press the PDO for its inclusion as such. Establishing a Slow Food presidium, they believed, would help them accomplish this.

SLOW FOOD AND THE AESTHETICIZATION OF PEASANT FOODS

Slow Food has been criticized by many for romanticizing traditional foodways. Alison Leitch has written: '[T]he recuperation of these kinds of proletarian or peasant foods could be interpreted as part of a pervasive nostalgia in modern societies for the past, for lost community, for the "good old days"' (Leitch 2000, 104). Jones et al. (2003) have suggested that Slow Food 'taps into a deep cultural well that romantically harks back to illusory images of a rural idyll or utopian past in which people and nature lived together in simple harmony' (p. 303).

While seemingly at odds with this purportedly excessive empathy for the past, the pastoral and the popular, Slow Food has also been criticized for being too modern, too urban and too exclusive. Even sympathetic commentators such as Miele and Murdoch (2003) have reminded us that 'Slow Food began as an elite movement of food lovers and food writers in Italy... [and] targeted its discursive resources at... well-educated, middle-aged, middle/upper class urban consumers' (p. 37). Leitch (2003) has reminded us of the contextual origins of Petrini and fellow Slow Food founders – the *Langhe*, a region marked not only by a pronounced tradition of working-class left-Catholicism, but also by strong connections to the aristocracy. Within this context, she tells us, Petrini and his cohort challenged the hierarchy and asceticism of the Italian Communist Party, to which they once belonged, by embracing the pursuit of gastronomic pleasure – a pursuit previously associated with the bourgeoisie as well as with the political right (p. 449). Despite their attempts to cast their conservatism as revolutionary (Parkins 2004, 372) – Petrini, for example, has argued that Slow Food 'creates an elite without excluding anyone' (Parkins 2004, 374) – the organization's founders have often been characterized as members of 'the caviar left', or as 'a radical elite'. To be sure, Slow Food today, with more than 100,000 members worldwide, has become far more than just its founders, but the grass-roots 'convivia' through which the organization has historically expanded have themselves often been cast as upper-middle-class dinner clubs, composed of members who can afford to sample and celebrate foods (often procured from distant places) worthy of Slow Food recognition.⁴ Whether at the leadership level, or at the grass roots, according to Pietrykowski, 'adopting cultural capital normally associated with upper-income or highly educated individuals conveys elitism and an aesthetic sensibility that privileges symbolic use value over material use value' (Pietrykowski 2004, 314). He concludes, '[Slow Food's] focus on cultivating taste carries a distinctly aristocratic tone' (p. 311).

We consider it essential to view Slow Food's elitist tendencies in light of the organization's manifest ambivalence towards consumers. In our view, Slow Food is defined by a fundamental paradox: it conceives of itself as a movement in opposition to global consumerism, and yet it is part and parcel of this same phenomenon; it calls upon members to remake the commoditized food world, but to do so *through consumption*, albeit of a more discerning kind. Consequently, from top to bottom, Slow Food has looked upon consumers – particularly low-income consumers at the broad base – with deep suspicion. In an historical moment when people define themselves less and less by what they do or make, and more and more by what they buy or own, they are seen in the eyes of Slow Food as complicit in consumer capitalism – allowing it to define their desires, satisfy their needs and shape their identities. Tellingly, even as the organization's founders criticized the Italian Communist Party for its rigid hierarchy, they

⁴ According to Chrzan, celebrants of Slow Food 'overlook the thousands of local organic farmers, responsible and passionate restaurateurs, committed food purveyors, and organizers of food co-ops, CSAs, farmers' markets, and food buying clubs that sprung up all over Europe and North America during the 1970s and beyond' (Chrzan 2004, 121).

founded a mass 'movement' with the issuance of a manifesto (Parkins 2004, 373), holding potential members *qua consumers* at arms length while claiming to speak for them, chastising them for not buying the right kinds of food while imploring them to do so.

If Slow Food's elitism can be connected to the organization's ambivalence for the consuming masses, we argue that its romanticism can be linked to an equally profound ambivalence for contemporary food producers. By Slow Food's conception, just as consumerism has corrupted consumers, so too has it generally corrupted contemporary food producers, who have had to operate within its context. To be sure, the growth of consumer capitalism after the Second World War has given rise to dramatic forms of consolidation and concentration of the food trade worldwide, with smaller, less-capitalized food producers and traders often disappearing or selling out to larger entities. In the wake of these historical transformations, Slow Food often scolds producers for no longer making 'authentic' foods, even as it entreats them to do so.

Unable to identify with the vast majority of contemporary producers *or* consumers (but still keen to differentiate themselves from a contemporary elite with whom they may differ ideologically, but with whom they also share greater material affinities than generally admitted⁵), Slow Food's founders and members have, we contend, generally looked outside of the present historical conjuncture, grounding their vision of a better food world in 'tradition'. Slow Food's world of tradition is rooted in a vaguely defined past, perpetually on the verge of disappearance. This world of tradition is occupied first and foremost by foodstuffs, stripped of much of their socio-economic context, aestheticized and apotheosized. In so far as this world is also inhabited by people, they too are aestheticized. Slow Food's celebrated producers are generally cast as 'peasants', discursively constructed as timeless (connected to an ill-defined, pre-consumerism past, even if surviving, or reborn, today) and classless (not so wealthy that they cannot garner members' sympathy, but not so poor that they cannot eat well, for they are not only producers, but also members of a community that consumes its own 'quality' products). In the Slow Food imaginary, these good-food-making, good-food-eating peasants have no socio-logical 'others', whether rich or poor, whether today or in the past; their 'other' is consumerism itself, a force with which they struggle enduringly – a struggle in which Slow Food asks its members to join.

In her critical commentary on Slow Food, Rachel Laudan paints a different picture of the historical relationship between the peasantry and consumerism. She argues that, before the rise of consumer capitalism, the peasantry in most places generally lived undernourished lives of misery (see also Paxson 2005, fn 13; Zubaida 2008; Simonetti n.d.). By her account, 'culinary modernism' – the term she uses to describe the late-nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century industrialization and globalization of food production and supply systems – 'brought to an end, at least in the West, a two-tier system of eating', making the consumption of more prestigious and wholesome grains and meat affordable to the masses (Laudan 2004, 135–6). Gastronomy and its attendant aestheticization of food, Laudan asserts, is a prosperous, urban middle-class phenomenon, made possible only by culinary modernism. Slow Food, she tells us, is the product of a new kind of upper-middle-class elite in societies that have already reaped the benefits of culinary modernism (Laudan 2004, 143).⁶ We find Laudan's argument, at times, as reductionist as the one she critiques – despite her admission that 'a change as dramatic as the shift to

⁵ Donati suggests that Slow Food members often seek to distance themselves from social and economic transformations to which their own behaviour has substantially contributed, and that they often mourn that which they themselves previously abandoned (Donati 2005, 229; see also Paxson 2005).

⁶ Meneley similarly argues that Slow Food generally ignores how pre-modern foodways were bound up with a gendered division of labour, while mass-produced foods are historically associated with the professionalization of women (Meneley 2004, 171).

Culinary Modernism could not have occurred and did not occur without creating a wide variety of problems' (Laudan 2004, 137). 'Culinary modernism', as we shall see, was every bit as miserable for the landless labourers of the Serpa region, who she would cast as its beneficiaries, as that which preceded it. And of course, what Laudan calls 'culinary modernism' has been associated with popular dispossession from land and other means of production, the concentration of wealth, the reduction of ecological, cultural and culinary diversity, the depletion of natural resources and the degradation of ecosystems around the globe. But Laudan's assertion that the diets of Slow Food's celebrated pre-modern peasants were generally meagre, to say the least, is in our view well founded.

In what follows, we draw upon the critiques of Slow Food elaborated above. Whereas these have tended to counter Slow Food's sweeping narratives with counter-narratives of similarly broad scope,⁷ we ground our critique in a singular, detailed history of a particular foodstuff celebrated by Slow Food. Indeed, our principal objective in this paper is to document the social history of Serpa cheese – a history we consider to be far more complex than the version presented by Presidium organizers. By relocating Serpa cheese within a reconstructed socio-economic history of the region and its inhabitants, we seek to de-aestheticize this foodstuff and its producers. Ours is an unromanticized history of Serpa cheese, shaped by the exigencies of poverty, hunger and class conflict. It is a history in which Serpa cheese has, to be sure, played an important role, but a role, we argue, that renders specious its celebration by Slow Food today as a timeless, classless, traditional food. Our history – based upon a close reading of primary and secondary sources, interviews with cheese makers and others involved with Serpa cheese over the years, and direct observation of cheese making today – reveals how, and why, in a changing socio-economic context, local producers moved away from making what Slow Food now calls *Serpa Velho*. Our account also implicates the broader Alentejano populace in this transformation, showing how and why – despite Presidium organizers' claims that they 'prefer *Serpa Velho*' – their tastes have in fact changed with changing times.

Our detailed case history reinforces existing critiques of Slow Food by challenging the organization's romantic image of a product, of those who have made it and of those who have eaten it, at the same time laying bare the elitism of this romance. But where others have excused Slow Food's romanticism as a useful form of utopianism, we further argue, by way of this same case study, that Slow Food's historical naïveté may actually place it at odds with the organization's stated objectives, namely support for food that is 'good, clean and fair'. We critically examine these objectives after placing the principal aims of the Serpa Cheese Presidium project in historical context one at a time. Before doing this, however, we introduce the reader to Serpa cheese through a rudimentary description of its basic characteristics and the methods that we saw being used in its production today.

THE MAKING OF SERPA CHEESE

The preponderance, to date, of Arabic terms in the Serpa cheese-making lexicon is often presented as evidence of the Moorish foundations of cheese making in the Alentejo (Conde de Ficalho 1979 [1899–1904], 152–67; Caldeira 1994, 167, 176).⁸ In fact, the production of ewe's milk cheese in the region dates back at least to the Roman period (Macedo et al. 1993, 1725; Rebelo 1994, 194; Amaral 1996, 23; Bettencourt and Sobral 1998, 159). Cheese was first made

⁷ Notable exceptions to this include Leitch (2000), Lotti (2010) and Meneley (2004).

⁸ For example, *alavão*, from the Arabic *al-labban* (milk), meaning the flock during the milking season; and *almece*, meaning whey.

by shepherds in the region that the Romans called the *Herminius Mons* (today, the *Serra de Estrela*), and subsequently spread to the surrounding lowlands with shepherds and their flocks in transhumance. The basic recipes used to make cheese throughout Portugal, and indeed in much of northern and western Spain, descend from this shared ancestor and, as a result, many regional cheeses share much in common (Amaral 1996, 25–6; Bettencourt and Sobral 1998, 160). At the same time, subtle variations of method may be observed not only between the makers of differently named cheeses in the broader region but also amongst the makers of a cheese by the same name, such as Serpa.

We visited ten Serpa producers over a 2-week period in March 2008, and watched eight of them making cheese. The largest of these had a flock of 2,000 sheep, staggered lambing throughout the year to ensure a constant supply of milk, and kept his milking ewes in the barn where they were fed on rations. The smallest purchased milk from an itinerant shepherd who grazed his sheep on vacant, rented or public land. Regardless, most producers in the region made cheese once a day from morning milk combined with the preceding day's refrigerated evening milk. In all but the most modern cheese rooms, milk was filtered by pouring it into the vat through a funnel lined with 30–40 sheets of woollen cloth, and seeded near the bottom with approximately five grams of salt per litre of milk to 'slow down fermentation and make the curd easier to work' (Lopes 1985, 24–5; Caldeira 1994, 178). The milk was then heated to temperatures ranging from 27 to 34°C depending upon the producer.

Serpa producers use a cardoon extract to curdle their milk. Cardoon (*Cynara cardunculus*, the ancestor of the artichoke, and sometimes called 'artichoke thistle') is native to the Mediterranean region and grows well in the Alentejo (Amaral 1996, 56). Its flowers, like those of the artichoke, are edible, but since ancient times it is the stalk of the plant that, once shorn of its stinging spines and braised, has been more commonly consumed. The Romans not only ate cardoon this way, but also discovered that an infusion made from its dried flowers could be used to curdle sheep's milk, lending citrus notes to the resultant cheese (McGee 2004, 57).⁹ The use of cardoon as a coagulant in cheese making spread with the Romans to the Iberian Peninsula, and is used in the production of most sheep's milk cheeses in Portugal and many in Spain to this day (Matos and Sá 1948, 25; McGee 2004, 57), constituting perhaps their most important distinguishing characteristic. Some of the producers that we visited grew their own cardoon (Vez 2008), while others purchased bags of fine dried cardoon petals from suppliers at a reported cost of €50 per kilogram. The night before making cheese, they ground these dried flowers – 30–40 grams per 100 litres of milk – in a mortar together with a pinch of salt, and then combined them with warm water. The next morning, the infusion was filtered to remove any sediment and then added to the warmed milk in the vat. This solution caused the curd to set within 45–90 minutes, depending on the cheese maker (see also Matos and Sá 1948, 25; Lopes 1985, 25; Caldeira 1994, 178; Bettencourt and Sobral 1998, 162).

Larger-scale producers made cheese in vats fitted with motor-driven cutting frames and stirring paddles. Smaller-scale producers cut the curd by pulling a screen from one end of the vat to the other, and stirred it with a pointed-tip wooden spoon that reached into the corners of the vat. Once the curd was evenly cut, it was removed from the vat, salted and pressed. Some of those we visited pressed the curd with 'belts' that were tightened by increments to expel whey. Some placed balls of curd in square pieces of cloth, gathered up the edges and twisted them, and then rolled this packet of curd on the draining table to press out whey. Whether

⁹ According to McGee, cardoon contains an enzyme very similar to calf chymosin (McGee 2004, 57). Cardoon's taste effects are disputed by some, who refer to blind tests in which tasters could discern no difference between cheeses made using animal rennet and those made using cardoon (Matos and Sá 1948, 30; Amaral 1996, 57).

they used both, one or none of these first two techniques, all ultimately transferred the curd into plastic moulds that were placed under static weights or inserted in hydraulic pressing machines.¹⁰

Later in the day, cheeses were removed from the moulds and arranged on shelves in a room called the *casa de enxugo* (drying house). Most producers left their cheeses in this first relatively warm room (approximately 18°C) for around 10 days, where they were turned once or twice a day as they gave off more moisture and, eventually, formed a crust. Cheese makers told us that the cheeses in this room ‘were working’; in other words, that they were fermenting (see also Caldeira 1994, 181; Amaral 1996, 49). In time, they would be moved to a second, cooler room (approximately 12–16°C) called the *casa de cura* (curing house) (see also Amaral 1996, 49–50), where they would age at a slower rate.¹¹ Those we visited aged most, if not all, of their cheeses for only around 30 days.

While historical continuities were manifest in the Serpa cheese rooms that we visited, so too were transformations and departures. In the next three sections, we focus on the three changes considered most important, and most problematic, by Presidium organizers – the abandonment of the Merino breed, the move away from aging cheese in the cheese room rafters and the selling of younger, softer cheeses – as well as on the broader context that we consider essential to better understand these changes, before asking whether or not the Presidium project heralds a return to Serpa cheese that is ‘good, clean and fair’.

WELL-ADAPTED, OR UNFIT FOR PURPOSE? THE DISAPPEARANCE OF MERINO

The Serpa Cheese Presidium brochure informs readers that Serpa is made today ‘predominantly’ from the milk of the French Lacaune breed ‘that has replaced the local Merino because it is more productive and easier to manage’. Its mention of the historical place of Merino in Serpa production, of course, begs the question of whether or not the ‘traditional version’ of Serpa cheese that the Presidium pledges to protect might be, should be, or even is, made from Merino milk. Many Slow Food presidia explicitly celebrate and protect ‘heritage’ animal breeds and plant varieties, and the very first of ten regulatory guidelines for Slow Food’s cheese presidia states that ‘the production of cheese must be linked, where possible, to the use of cow, sheep, goat or mixed (sheep and goat) milk obtained from the milking of *native*, locally raised breeds’ (Slow Food n.d.).¹²

Serpa producers and vendors we visited spoke of the Merino with great nostalgia, but despite strong association with the Iberian Peninsula, the origins of the breed in fact lie elsewhere. Archaeological finds bear evidence of livestock – including sheep – domestication on the Iberian Peninsula before its occupation by the Romans (Ribeiro 1940–1, 277; Caldeira 1994, 185; Amaral 1996, 23; Dias 2000, 61; Saramago 2008). When the Romans arrived, however, they would have found not Merino but, instead, domesticated descendents of the

¹⁰ Whey was generally used to make *queijão*, a delicate low-fat cheese that could be eaten as such, or used in baking; as, for example, in the regional pastry called *queijada* (Modesto and Barbosa 2007, 66). *Requeijão*, like the Italian *ricotta*, is made by heating whey to a higher temperature and coagulating it, sometimes with the aid of an acid such as lemon or vinegar. *Ricotta*, in Italian, means ‘re-cooked’; *requeijão* might be translated as re-cheesed.

¹¹ Small amounts of cheese were also aged in clay pots, sometimes immersed in a mixture of olive oil and paprika (Caldeira 1994, 182; Elias 2008).

¹² Carlo Petrini has written: ‘We must give preference to local varieties and breeds: their survival ensures the biodiversity that enables the natural system to regulate itself. They are part of the ecosystem where they originated and evolved, and they are a guarantee of the maintenance of that ecosystem. They insure a wider variety of tastes, and their genetic heritage is a legacy to all mankind’ (Petrini 2007, 119).

peninsula's wild races – a breed that ultimately came to be known as Campaniça. These animals were well adapted to the local ecology, and able to walk great distances and to forage on diverse food sources at varying altitudes (Caldeira 1994, 168, 185–6). The Romans, like those they conquered on the peninsula, raised Campaniça, for milk, meat, wool and skins. Only in the twelfth century were Merino introduced on to the peninsula. They probably descended from animals transported by the Phoenicians from Asia Minor to North Africa, but they were brought to the peninsula by the Benimerines (after whom they would come to be called) near the end of the Moorish occupation (Caldeira 1994, 168, 185).

In prehistoric as well as Roman times, the grazing of livestock on the Iberian Peninsula centred on mountainous regions, but in the colder winter months, animals were brought down to the surrounding plains. In what is today Portugal, the Serra da Estrela (Star Range) provided lush summer pastures, as did the Castilian highlands in what is today Spain. The lowland plains on either side of the Guadiana River – today dividing the Spanish Extremadura and Andalucía from the Portuguese Alentejo and Algarve – offered good winter pasture.¹³ The Benimerines and their flocks practiced transhumant pastoralism as well, moving seasonally between the highlands and lowlands, along the way temporarily occupying small habitations (some of which can still be seen on the land today). These shepherds, whose animals gave finer wool than the Campaniça, prospered in the interstitial spaces between Moorish settlements and the advancing *reconquista* (Saramago 2008).

The triumph of the *reconquista*, however, brought the eventual appropriation of these flocks by *conquistadores*, Christian nobles and the Church itself. Some Christian settlers took up farming. As livestock owners continued to move their animals long distances in search of seasonal pasture, and as these animals inevitably trampled or grazed on crops along their migratory routes, conflicts arose. But in a very short time, the proprietors of sheep, as well as the Castilian monarchy that taxed them, discovered the great profits to be made by marketing fine Merino wool in places such as England and Flanders. The viability and fame of the Merino breed was consolidated when King Alfonso X of Castile famously granted rights of passage and grazing (called *cañadas*) in perpetuity to the *Honrado Concejo de la Mesta de Pastores*, as well as to other, smaller *mestas* (sheep owners' councils).¹⁴ Spanish monarchs subsequently sought to protect that nation's virtual monopoly on the trade in Merino wool by banning the export of Merino sheep on penalty of death (until the eighteenth century), but Spanish control over the breed was never total, even if it was Spanish owners who most successfully honed the breed through selective crossing. Shepherds on both sides of the Guadiana River frontier regularly assembled and migrated together on *cañadas* (*canadas* in Portuguese) on either side of the boundary, at least until King João III of Portugal prohibited such border crossing in 1569 (Ribeiro 1940–1, 283). Merino sheep – including some descendants from Spanish flocks – prospered in Portugal alongside older breeds such as the Campaniça.

The Portuguese crown exercised weaker control over the livestock economy, and was less effective than its counterpart across the border in protecting pastoral rights. Shepherds frequently lost out in conflicts with the agricultural communities whose land they traversed (Ribeiro 1940–1, 280). Nonetheless, according to the Portuguese geographer Orlando Ribeiro,

¹³ The region on the left bank of the Guadiana, where the town of Serpa was founded before the arrival of the Romans, today sees only approximately 600 millimetres of rain per year. Its delicate soils, however, support the growth of several species of *Graminae* (grasses), as well as numerous *Fabaceae* (or *Leguminosae*), including nine varieties from the clover genus, *Trifolium*, and four of the burclover genus, *Medicago* (which includes alfalfa) (Bettencourt 1968, 269–70).

¹⁴ The term *mestas* may derive from *animalia mixta*, large agglomerations of animals brought together during transhumance, or from the Arabic *meshta*, meaning winter quarters (Bishko 2008, 2).

the history of transhumant pastoralism in Portugal is 'in its general lines, identical to that of Spain' albeit 'on a more reduced scale' (Ribeiro 1940–1, 293). In other words, the practice of pasturing livestock in the mountains in the summer and in the lower plains in wintertime continued in Portugal after the *reconquista*, as it did in Spain, even if the livestock economy was less predominant in the former than it was in the latter (Ribeiro 1940–1, 280, 282, 284). According to Ribeiro, Portugal 'also had *canadas*, however without the fixed and permanent character of the Spanish pastoral paths' (Ribeiro 1940–1, 283).

The Napoleonic wars virtually destroyed the Spanish Merino wool industry, but Merino wool production would remain viable in Portugal until the early 1960s.¹⁵ In the meantime, however, other forces would profoundly transform the Portuguese livestock economy. In 1842, district authorities in Castelo Branco, which lay between the Serra da Estrela and the Alentejo, declared that common pastures posed 'one of the most powerful obstacles to the progress of Agriculture', because they prevented the planting of tree crops, kept potentially productive land in fallow and ultimately supported a more limited number of animals than could be raised in permanence on the same land. More importantly, common pastures undermined the principle of private property (Ribeiro 1940–1, 293). Within a few short years, agrarian liberalism would bring an end to transhumant pastoralism in Portugal. 'Little by little, the area of transhumance was restricted,' Ribeiro writes. 'The right of property that triumphed with liberalism and the advance of tree planting precipitated its decline' (Ribeiro 1940–1, 293). As a consequence, flocks came to reside in one place, whether in the highlands or in the lowlands, even if shepherds practiced more local forms of transhumance within these limited areas.

With the collapse of the Portuguese rural economy following the Second World War (further discussed below), livestock numbers fell in the Alentejo (Baptista 2010, 61–2), but Merino, and to a lesser extent Campaniça, still predominated in the flocks that remained in the region. Ironically, it would be the establishment of a geographical indication regime, designed to valorize Serpa cheese and the 'traditional' methods by which it was produced, that would lead to the disappearance of Merino in the flocks in and around Serpa. Following the successful examples of France and Italy in using geographical indication regimes to increase the market value of not only wine but also other foodstuffs named after their place of production, the Portuguese government passed legislation in 1984 (Decreto-Lei no. 146/84 de Maio) enabling cheese producers to attain *Denominação de Origem Controlada* (DOC) status. The DOC for Serpa cheese, defining its essential characteristics and the methods by which it could be produced, was established in 1987 (*Decreto Regulamentar No. 39/87 de 29 de Junho*), and the *Associação de Criadores de Ovinos do Sul* (ACOS) was set up in 1991 (*Portaria No. 252/91 de 26 de Março*) to certify the authenticity of cheese marketed as *Queijo Serpa*.

Those who set up the Serpa Cheese DOC conceived of the initiative as a means of reviving the livestock economy of the lower Alentejo by attaining recognition for Serpa cheese beyond the region of its production. Carlos Bettencourt, a Serpa-based veterinarian whose father led the initiative, explained that urban consumers had come to think of DOC status as a mark of quality, and that a vibrant niche was emerging for DOC products in the supermarket chains then spreading throughout the country (Bettencourt 2008). *Serra da Estrela* cheese had already successfully inhabited this niche, and it was with it (as well as with *Azeitão* and *São Jorge*) that Serpa would have to compete. However, the Serpa cheese makers did not make enough cheese

¹⁵ With the export of Merino sheep from Spain from the eighteenth century onwards, new centres of Merino wool production had already arisen. Germany would produce the finest Merino wool in the world in the early nineteenth century, and Australia would later become the leading producer.

to satisfy the demands of a national market. The Serpa DOC organizers consequently made two decisions.

The first of these concerned the geographical area in which the cheese could be made. As in so many other cases, Serpa cheese was a far more heterogeneous product than DOC recognition would suggest. Cheese made in Serpa and its environs varied according to the micro-ecologies in which it was made and the somewhat variable methods deployed by its individual makers through space and time (Lopes 2008). Some called what they made 'Serpa cheese' and some did not. In any case, most agreed that a reasonably similar cheese, that might be called *Queijo Serpa*, was made in the area between the Guadiana River and the Spanish border in the *concelhos* of Serpa and Moura in the district of Beja.¹⁶ But the area eventually delimited by the DOC was to include the *concelhos* of Mértola, Beja, Castro Verde, Almodôvar, Cuba, Ourique, Moura, Serpa, Vidigueira, Aljustrel and Ferreira do Alentejo, as well as parts of Odemira, Santiago do Cacém, Grândola and Alcácer do Sal. This larger delimitation was intended to allow those at greater remove to make Serpa cheese and/or those closer to Serpa to buy milk from further afield in order to increase their own levels of production, although this did not subsequently happen (Canada 2008).¹⁷

The second decision taken by creators of the DOC was to have more concrete effects. The DOC specified that *Queijo Serpa* was made from raw sheep's milk, but it *did not* specify the breed of sheep, nor what these animals should be fed. Whereas meat and milk had historically been secondary and tertiary products, the new ovine economy to which the Serpa Cheese DOC was to contribute conceived of milk, not wool, as the primary product. Merino milk was of very high quality, but for centuries Merino had been selected to improve the quality of their wool rather than the quantity (or even the quality) of their milk. The typical Merino ewe – significantly smaller than other breeds selected for meat and/or milk – gave only 17–20 litres of milk per season, whereas the Portuguese *Bordaleira da Serra da Estrela* (hereafter, *Bordaleira*) and the French Lacaune (used for thousands of years in the making of Roquefort cheese) gave 120 litres, and as much as 260 litres, respectively, per season (Amaral 1996, 34). The milk of these breeds was not as rich in fats and proteins as Merino milk. Indeed, 100 litres of Merino milk would make 18 kilograms of cheese, and the same amount of *Bordaleira* or Lacaune milk would make only 15.8 and 14.9 kilograms of cheese, respectively (Fernandes 2000, 13).¹⁸ But the greater volumes of milk given compensated for this many times over, making *Bordaleira* and Lacaune far more economically viable for sheep farmers focusing on cheese production (Bettencourt and Sobral 1998, 161).

¹⁶ Others conceived of the region somewhat more broadly as also including the *concelhos* of Beja and Castro Verde, part or all of the *concelho* of Mértola, and parts of the *concelhos* of Ourique, Aljustrel and perhaps even Ferreira do Alentejo (Lopes 1985, 4; Castelhamo 2008).

¹⁷ In fact, only a small minority of producers in the region sought DOC certification (Bettencourt and Sobral 1998, 161). Only in supermarkets outside of the Alentejo were (a limited number of) consumers willing to pay the unit price necessary for producers to recoup the costs of certification (Lopes 2008), and few producers were able to supply this market. Over time, many of those who originally sought certification abandoned the DOC (Batista 2000, 81), although larger producers – who had originally been reluctant (Bettencourt 2008) – subsequently embraced certification, especially for cheese sold through national supermarket chains (cf. Bowen and Valenzuela Zapata 2009).

¹⁸ Higher-yield breeds such as the *Bordaleira* and Lacaune have also been selected for decades for their suitability for machine milking, and consequently have longer, more uniform teats. Many producers told us that Merino could not be milked mechanically owing to the small size and varied shapes of their teats (Bule 2008). We were told by some that only crossbred Merino could be mechanically milked (Castelhamo 2008). However, Bettencourt, who oversaw the *Centro de Experimentação do Baixo Alentejo*, a government-run gene bank and breeding station on the *Herdade da Abóbada* in Vila Nova de São Bento, told us that the station's Merino flock was, in fact, milked by machine.

Due to the historical decline of transhumance in the region, the rustic traits of Merino and Campaniça, refined over centuries of adaptation to the local ecology – (their abilities to forage on diverse species and over greater distances and more rugged terrain) – afforded little tangible value to offset the lower volume of milk that they delivered. When the Serpa DOC omitted the use of Merino, or Campaniça, from its requirements, it therefore called producers' attention to the possibility of making Serpa cheese with the milk of other breeds (something few had previously considered) while still having the cheese *recognized* – now officially – as *Serpa*. Within a few short years, Bordaleira, and especially Lacaune, had displaced Merino and Campaniça almost entirely in the flocks of the lower Alentejo.

FACTORING THE WEATHER IN, AND OUT: FROM RAFTERS TO REFRIGERATION

The second of three principal concerns expressed by Presidium organizers is the fact that, today, Serpa cheese is generally aged in refrigerated drying and curing rooms on stainless steel shelves. This breaks with the historical practice, celebrated by Presidium organizers, of aging the cheese on reed mats in the rafters of the cheese room, and it is a transformation that the Presidium seeks to reverse in the production of *Serpa Velho*.

The Presidium focus on aging is in concert with local perceptions about the fundamental importance of aging to the character of Serpa cheese. Indeed, many with whom we spoke virtually equated Serpa cheese-making knowledge with knowledge of the aging process. Until the late twentieth century, cheese was made in the Serpa region for only part of the year, beginning in December or January after lambs (born in autumn) were weaned and sold for slaughter to be eaten at feasts at Christmas or Easter (especially on the Tuesday after Easter, when Serpa residents honour their patron saint, *Nossa Senhora da Guadalupe*), and ending in May or June, when pasture lands dried out (Bettencourt 1968, 270–1; Bettencourt 1990, 37; Bettencourt and Sobral 1998, 161; Castelhana 2008). Accordingly, cheese was made each year from the middle of winter until the onset of summer, when the Alentejo climate turns hot and dry. In the absence of natural caves or other cool, humid places where cheese might be aged, cheese makers faced difficult and highly variable conditions in which to mature their cheeses. The principal art of cheese making therefore lay in maintaining a relatively stable aging environment.

The last generation of cheese makers to work without refrigeration learned and practiced their trade on the *herdades* (farms) of *latifundio* estates in the middle of the twentieth century. These *herdades* employed specialist artisans, drawn from the large landless labouring class in the lower Alentejo, to make their cheese.¹⁹ Like other farmhands, cheese makers received monthly rations of grain, chickpeas, pig's lard, olives and olive oil. They also earned a small salary,²⁰ and kept a percentage of the cheese that they made (Castelhana 2008). Although they earned only marginally more than other landless labourers, however, cheese makers constituted a 'class apart' – considered artists by many, and reportedly even magicians, or alchemists, by some (Caldeira 1994, 177; Amaral 1996, 53). The requisite knowledge of cheese making was carefully guarded for generations by a few select families.²¹

¹⁹ As cheese making was a seasonal activity, these hired hands took other jobs in the regional rural economy when not making cheese (Castelhana 2008).

²⁰ Lopes reports that, in 1938, the average cheese maker's salary was 10 escudos per day (Lopes 1985, 21).

²¹ These families were mostly from Boa Vista (in Santa Clara do Louredo), but a few reportedly came from Penedo Gordo, Salvada and Cabeça Gorda (Lopes 1985, 14).

Because cheese making involved the daily use and subsequent washing of so many cloths (used to filter the milk; to strain *requeijão*; and to press the curd, line it in the mould, and wrap it on the aging room shelves to prevent it from flattening and bursting at the edges) and because cheese rooms were consequently surrounded constantly by 'laundry' hanging to dry in the sun, cheese rooms on the *herdades* came to be called '*rouparias*' (an antiquated Portuguese term for a wardrobe, or for a clothing shop) and cheese makers '*roupeiros*' (Caldeira 1994, 177; Amaral 1996, 53).

The rafters of the *rouparia* afforded the best location for the *roupeiro* to age cheese. In the winter, the rising heat and moisture of cheese making in the room below stabilized the temperature and humidity of the cheeses above, which lay on reed mats that allowed aeration of the cheese even on its bottom surface. Ambient temperatures rose and humidity levels fell in the latter months of cheese making as spring turned to early summer. For cheeses in advanced stages of aging – dry with thick crusts – this was not as much of a problem as it was for younger cheeses; in other words, those made later in the year (Vez 2008). In any case, if the cheese room became too dry, *roupeiros* doused the floor with water, which evaporated into the rafters above, keeping the cheeses moister and cooler (Caldeira 1994, 181). The only other means available to *roupeiros* to control the aging environment was to regulate the airflow. Depending upon the weather, *roupeiros* opened or closed particular doors or windows to let air out or to trap it inside (Lopes 1985, 20; Bettencourt and Sobral 1998, 163). Doing this effectively required *roupeiros* to distinguish between moist and dry winds. The direction of origin of these differing winds shifted with the seasons and with changing weather fronts, and patterns varied significantly from year to year (Caldeira 1994, 181). *Roupeiros* had to read these changing variables deftly – in short, they had to be proficient folk meteorologists – to successfully age their cheeses to completion.

When we spoke with cheese makers who had practiced these techniques in the past, they sometimes complained bitterly about enforcement of EU regulations requiring that cheese be aged on non-porous surfaces in climate-controlled environments by the *Autoridade de Segurança Alimentar e Económica* (ASAE) – the state institution created in 2005 to implement EU food safety regulations in Portugal.²² Bento Abraços, with whom we visited, felt so ill at ease aging his cheeses in compliance with these regulations, and felt that the product he made was so profoundly altered, that he quit cheese making altogether. Another ex-*roupeiro* with whom we spoke told us that, despite rules to the contrary, he opened up the windows and doors of his refrigerated aging rooms as he had in the past, thus playing cat and mouse with ASAE inspectors.

More often, however, changes to the conditions in which cheese makers aged their cheeses were the result of their own initiatives. Those who had built new cheese rooms or had started making cheese over the past two or three decades had generally installed refrigerated aging facilities fitted with stainless steel surfaces even before required to do so by ASAE. Jaime Borges Lopes, a medium-scale producer who built his cheese room and started making cheese several years before ASAE started enforcing these regulations, told us that the principal advantage cheese makers today enjoyed over their predecessors was the ability to control their aging environment. In the past, he told us, cheese makers fought constantly to create consistency in their work environment and in their product, but today this could be done more easily and more effectively with refrigeration and fans. While he resisted other forms of industrial

²² After initially prohibiting the use of wooden shelving in aging rooms, ASAE has since permitted it (Bettencourt 2008).

rationalization – (he put his sheep out to pasture year round, for example, instead of feeding them rations in the barn during the cheese-making season) – he considered this historical transformation a positive one (Lopes 2008).

Even the former *roupeiros* we visited – most of whom moved off the *herdades* and set themselves up independently from the 1960s (to be further discussed below) – had generally built for themselves more modern cheese rooms with tiled floors and stainless steel surfaces and, in some cases, with refrigerated aging rooms. José Bule, with whom we visited, switched over to stainless steel work surfaces of his own accord because they were much easier to clean. Saving time cleaning meant that he could spend more time making (more) cheese. Even greater incentives existed, whether for ex-*roupeiros* or newer cheese makers. As Lopes wrote in 1985 regarding the aging of Serpa in the rafters on reed mats: ‘Curing is an extremely tricky process, entailing great risk . . .’ (Lopes 1985, 32). In short, without refrigeration, cheese makers were often unsuccessful in aging their cheeses to completion in the ever-changing conditions in which they worked. A significant percentage of their cheeses in fact came to ruin. When refrigeration became available, it promised Serpa makers, new and old, more control and more consistency in the aging room, and ultimately higher yields. This was an attractive proposition for most ‘old timers’, even if it rendered obsolete much of their closely guarded specialist knowledge. For newcomers, the proposition was simply irresistible. By the time ASAE began to enforce EU regulations, very few cheese makers were still aging their cheese on reed mats in the rafters; only the very few still doing so were actually forced to abandon the practice.

FROM LABOURERS’ NECESSITIES TO CONSUMERS’ DESIRES: THE SOFTENING OF SERPA

The third transformation to Serpa cheese considered problematic by Presidium organizers is the length of time during which the cheese is cured. Most of the cheese sold today by Serpa makers is little more than 30 days old, and is called *amanteigado* (literally, ‘buttered’) (Amaral 1996, 50). By contrast, the Presidium defines *Serpa Velho* as cheese that has been aged for ‘at least six months’, asserting that this ‘traditional version’ is ‘preferred by people locally’. Local taste ‘preferences’ must, however, be considered within the broader, ever-changing context of the regional rural economy, and in relation to the role of cheese in the diet, if they are to be fully understood.

Cheese has served humans for millennia as a means of preserving milk and distributing its nutritional benefits throughout the year. This has certainly been the case in what is today the lower Alentejo, where pastures dry out in the summer months, making the milking of pasture-fed animals impossible. From Roman times, through the Moorish occupation and following the Christian *reconquista*, shepherds in the region made their own cheese when their animals gave milk, and consumed it throughout the year. Even after the liberal revolution in the mid-nineteenth century, and continuing until the late twentieth century, tenant farmers kept small flocks and, once lambs had been weaned, made cheese in their homes for their own consumption later in the year (Bettencourt 2008; Lopes 2008).²³ But from the mid-nineteenth century until just after the Second World War, most of the cheese made in the lower Alentejo was produced on the *latifundia* estates that shaped every facet of life in the region.

²³ One of the women working in the cheese room when we visited the *Monte da Torre Varela* had made cheese in her home for her own family’s consumption and for sale in small amounts until as recently as 3–4 years ago, when she was forced to stop doing so because she was unable to make the required improvements to comply with EU regulations. Her story was not unique. Whereas Seara reported the existence of 38 producers in the Serpa region in 1994 (Amaral 1996, 54), the numbers had fallen to a dozen or so when we worked there in 2008. Many of those abandoning production would have been homestead producers unable to comply with EU regulations.

Popular accounts suggest that Alentejo *latifundia* are direct descendents of Roman estates, occupied in the interim by Moorish conquerors and Christian conquistadores (Vez 2008). Santos tells us otherwise, arguing that *latifundia* are historically unprecedented entities in the region, and that their roots are no deeper than the decades preceding the rise of the liberal regime. Prior to this, he argues, aristocratic, ecclesiastical, territorial and welfare institutions held most of the land in the region, but rented much of it out to tenants. In the early years of the nineteenth century, however, the lease market changed dramatically, limiting access to land and consolidating control over it in the hands of a small ascendant bourgeoisie (Santos 2004). The writings of the Portuguese anthropologist José Cutileiro support this view. By the end of the nineteenth century, he tells us, Portuguese liberalism had created conditions for an emergent class to replace the crown, aristocrats, the Church and the community as the principal owners of land, and to establish the 'agricultural houses' that would subsequently shape the rural economy of the Alentejo for more than a century to come (Cutileiro 1971, 13–24).²⁴

As suggested above, the partition of the commons denied shepherds and small farmers the grazing rights they needed to raise animals and thus consolidated the monopoly of large landholders over livestock rearing. The concentration of land was far greater in the arid Alentejo region than in the mountainous Serra de Estrela, although more pronounced in the upper Alentejo than in the lower (Bettencourt 2008). In any case, Serpa and its environs were defined in this period by these 'agricultural houses' – economic units comprising several farms (*herdades*) of, on average, 500–1,000 hectares each, but sometimes as much as 5,000 hectares. These were the agents in the Alentejo of what Laudan, above, has defined as 'culinary modernism'. *Latifundiários* grew cereals – including oats, rye, barley and especially wheat – more intensively, and grazed cattle in far greater numbers, than ever before seen in the region (Cutileiro 1971, 25–35), pushing this fragile ecosystem to, and in some cases beyond, its limits (Lopes 1985, 9). The *latifundia* prospered, however, because of their diverse activities. 'If one thing failed in a given year, another succeeded', Carlos Castelhana told us (Castelhana 2008). Alongside new crops, olive groves continued to yield olives and olive oil, and vineyards wine and vinegar, as they had for centuries before. And the average estate kept around 1,000 sheep. Estate owners practiced new forms of micro-transhumance, grazing their flocks on dispersed holdings in the Guadiana River valley in the winter, in the higher plains in the summer, and on crop residues following the harvest (Caldeira 1994, 168; Castelhana 2008). Although the wool industry was never as predominant in Portugal as it was in Spain, wool was the primary product derived from these flocks. However, young rams and a selected number of ewes were slaughtered each season, and their meat sold and consumed largely at holiday feasts. After lambs were weaned, cheese was made from the ewes' milk until the flock was dried off with the onset of summer. Milk and cheese may have been tertiary products, but they were economically significant enough that no sheep owner failed to exploit them (Sobral 1993, 55). Wages were kept low by the abundant supply of landless labour, as well as by the control exercised over political institutions by the

²⁴ According to Cutileiro: 'The most socially significant, but not necessarily the most qualitatively important, change in land property patterns was that brought about by the partition of the commons. All other changes which altered the characteristic features of the *ancien régime* would have affected only the upper groups of society. The new rich owners usually farmed their land themselves, whereas previous owners rented or leased it out; but to the labourers and sharecroppers who made up the majority of the population this could only mean a change of employer and not *per se* a change of conditions. The partition of the commons, however, affected their livelihoods in a drastic way' (Cutileiro 1971, 15).

dominant class.²⁵ As we have seen, workers were paid in significant part in agricultural produce. Cheese was, in fact, most important to the *latifundia* economy as a component of the wages in kind paid to farmhands.

The use of Serpa cheese as a form of payment to landless labourers had important effects, historically, on its defining characteristics. Cheeses of different dimensions were produced. A cheese of 200–250 grams was called a *merendeira*; a cheese of 800–900 grams was called a *cunca*; a cheese of 1,000–1,500 grams was considered *normal*; and a cheese of 2,000–2,500 grams was called *gigante*. The smaller cheeses were made for payment to labourers (Castelhano 2008). A *merendeira* was of a size that a worker might carry with him to work, or on a journey (Modesto and Barbosa 2007, 63), while a *cunca* might be consumed in labouring-class homes by several people. Larger cheeses were produced for the tables of estate owners and were generally consumed much younger (Caldeira 1994, 168; Amaral 1996, 53). A *queijo normal* might be eaten by the *landowning* family, and a *queijo gigante* at an estate dinner with guests. Some *herdades* sold ‘surplus’ cheeses in local markets, or in Beja, but intentional production of a ‘surplus’ was rare (Lopes 2008). More often, sale of cheese was the result of too much cheese coming ripe at the same time (usually soft cheese, made at the end of spring), and of *roupeiros* consequently telling their employers that it had to be sold before it spoiled (Lopes 2008).

In any case, what is today described as locals’ ‘preference’ for harder, longer-aged cheeses was historically overdetermined by contingencies. Harder aged cheeses allowed the landless labouring class to preserve this foodstuff longer, and thus to extend consumption of this vital source of fat and protein deeper into the summer and autumn months. Indeed, not all of the cheeses given to, and consumed by, farm workers were aged for 6 months. Near the end of the cheese-making season, as summer loomed and the prospects of successfully aging cheese to completion diminished, workers were often paid in semi-cured, or soft, young cheeses (Castelhano 2008). Labourers ate these cheeses with ambivalence (Saramago 2008). Their lighter milder taste meant that they *could* be consumed in greater portions (allowing labourers in small measure to emulate landowners!), but also that they *had to be* consumed more quickly, before they spoiled, meaning that they *could not* be preserved, as prudence would dictate. In any case, when they ate them, farmhands appreciated the taste of these uncommon treats, albeit differently than they appreciated harder aged cheeses.

All of this was to change. Following the Second World War, the Alentejo fell into crisis. Wheat prices declined as low-cost industrialized production in the United States and elsewhere transformed the global market. Alentejo farmers could no longer compete, and the deplorable conditions for farm labourers worsened. Government policy supporting the mechanization of agriculture ultimately worsened prospects for farm workers, who abandoned the region en masse for work in emerging industries in and around Lisbon, or abroad. The Alentejo population decreased by 10 per cent in the 1950s, and by a further 33 per cent in the 1960s (Baptista 2010). With this massive depopulation, landowners who continued to farm could no longer count on cheap labour as they previously had (Santos 2004). Many *herdades* ceased milking their flocks and making cheese (Bettencourt 1968, 274; Lopes 1985, 5). This was not simply because they were unable to hire farmhands and cheese makers. As the workforce diminished on these estates, so too did the need for cheese with which to pay labourers. In time, many *herdades* ceased agricultural production altogether.²⁶

²⁵ Exacerbating this, landowners often hired migrant workers to undercut the political power of the local workforce (Santos 2004).

²⁶ When their own children abandoned the estates to take jobs in towns and cities, many *latifundiários* sold their land.

Roupeiros navigated these troubled times in varied ways. Many had managed to save enough money so that, when given the chance, they could purchase the very cheese rooms in which they had previously been employed (Lopes 1985, 22; Castelhanos 2008). Most of these, and others, would eventually set up cheese rooms in their own houses, usually located in one of the regional towns (Caldeira 1994, 168; Bettencourt and Sobral 1998, 161; Abraços 2008). José Bule, who worked as a *roupeiro* on a *herdade* as a young man, made cheese when we visited with him in the house where he was born 60 years earlier (Bule 2008). Ex-*roupeiros* making cheese in town generally did not own flocks. They bought milk, instead, from estate owners who had kept flocks but were no longer making cheese, or from shepherds grazing small flocks on vacant, rented or public land (Caldeira 1994, 182; Amaral 1996, 54). In any case, by the mid-1960s, cheese was almost exclusively made in the Serpa region by ex-*roupeiros* in their houses in town (Lopes 2008). From the early 1980s, ex-*roupeiros* were joined in the production of Serpa cheese by new cheese makers. Some of these came from the Serpa region, and some did not. Some started making cheese in town, like ex-*roupeiros*, and some took up cheese making on *herdades*.²⁷

The shifting political economy of the region changed not only those producing Serpa cheese, but also those consuming it. From the mid-1960s, *roupeiros* sold their cheese to town folk in the region, but also to Alentejanos who had left the region for jobs in the Lisbon metropolitan area. To this day, the regional market remains important for Serpa producers, especially smaller-scale cheese makers, all of whom we saw selling cheese from shops adjacent to their cheese rooms. Larger producers, however, began selling their product to the super-market chains that expanded throughout Portugal in the late 1980s, and this has become their principal market outlet. Whether via supermarkets, or via the delicatessens before them that sold regional products in Lisbon, Serpa producers reached consumers far beyond the Alentejo in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Refrigerated transport of foodstuffs from the countryside to the city made this possible. What is more, the growing urban middle class themselves came to own refrigerators, and no longer required products that would keep at room temperature. These salaried consumers could also purchase products at more regular intervals, obviating the need for long-term conservation. They even had 'disposable income', and could 'feast' from time to time on foods such as soft cheeses that rural residents considered luxuries.

Although later than their urban counterparts, rural Alentejanos followed suit. Despite the stagnation of the rural economy in the years after the Second World War, labour scarcity pushed up wages somewhat for those remaining in the rural workforce. Some rural residents received remittances from migrant kin. As a consequence, rural Alentejanos now had more cash with

²⁷ The largest producer of Serpa cheese today is the son of a Mértola shepherd, who learned cheese making from his mother and then set up a plant to make cheese in Beja (Bettencourt 2008). When the owner of the *Monte das Oliveiras* decided in the early 1990s to sell his property after his children moved to Lisbon, Jaime Borges Lopes and his brother, who grew up in the region, bought the property and converted it from cereal production to a sheep farm; as the price they could fetch for milk proved too low to make a living, they started making cheese (Lopes 2008). François Raoul Vez was born and raised in Switzerland, but married Gertrudes Palma, of Serpa, in the mid-1990s; they raised sheep on the *herdade* they owned, and sold their milk to four town-based *rouparias*; when one of these producers ran up a large bill for milk, a court awarded the *rouparia* to François and Gertrudes, and they have run it themselves ever since (Vez 2008). Some long-standing *herdade* owners themselves turned, or returned, to cheese making – now as a business. When the owners of the *Monte da Torre Varela* were unable to make a living selling sheep's milk, their son Tiago set up a new cheese room on the *herdade*; he had been making cheese for 3 years when we visited him there. Others building new cheese-making facilities were foreign to the region – some self-made businessmen like Carlos Silva, of *Ovelheira*, and some men of existing wealth who acquired property in the region and farmed more as hobby than business, like João Nunes, of the *Herdade da Quinta de Dom Luís*.

which to make more regular purchases. As cheese was being made year round,²⁸ conservation over months was no longer necessary. And in time, rural households too could afford refrigerators. With this changing context, local ‘tastes’ changed. Young people, especially, began to develop a preference for softer, younger cheeses. And cheese makers met this demand by producing smaller-sized *amanteigado* cheeses for their consumption.²⁹

From 1987, the Serpa Cheese DOC consolidated shifting taste preferences. A principal aim of the DOC was to make Serpa more competitive beyond its region of origin. As we have seen, in the growing national marketplace, Serpa had to compete with other Portuguese cheeses, including Serra da Estrela, with which many consumers had longer, or greater, familiarity. Identified with the lush mountain pastures on which its flocks grazed in summer, Serra da Estrela shaped national consumer tastes in profound ways, becoming the cheese of preference among urban clients. By contrast, Serpa, made in the arid Alentejo lowlands, came to be considered an inferior product. On the emerging national palate, Serpa was too *picante* – not enough like Serra da Estrela, with its soft texture and creamy taste – to satisfy expectations (Bettencourt 2008). The Serpa DOC sought to redress this, in large measure by emulating Serra da Estrela, not only in marketing strategies but also in productive methods. To this end, the DOC defined Serpa cheese as *amanteigado* and set its minimum time of aging at only 30 days. From 1991, as prescribed by the DOC, ACOS began taste-testing cheeses as a condition of certification, using for their guidelines benchmarks specified by the DOC favouring softer, younger cheeses. As harder aged cheeses generally did not meet DOC taste specifications, they could no longer be called *Queijo Serpa*.

When we spoke with João Canada, who oversaw ACOS testing in his laboratory at the *Escola Superior Agrária* in the *Instituto Politécnico de Beja*, he concluded, quite simply, that there was no longer an interest in the region in *queijo curado* (hard aged cheese); ‘*amanteigado* cheese,’ he told us, ‘is preferred throughout Portugal!’ (Canada 2008). Cheese-maker Jaime Borges Lopes essentially agreed with him. ‘Harder aged [Serpa] cheeses are a relic,’ he told us, ‘a curiosity’ (Lopes 2008).

GOOD, CLEAN AND FAIR?

In a recently published book, Slow Food founder Carlo Petrini has attempted to flesh out the organization’s aims by elaborating ‘three interdependent, essential criteria for judging the acceptability of any particular food’ (Petrini 2007, 2). He tells us that ‘quality products’ must be ‘good, clean and fair’. Concerning ‘good,’ he writes: ‘What is good in gastronomy is good if two conditions hold: first, that a product can be linked with a certain naturalness which respects the product’s original characteristics as much as possible; secondly, that it produces recognizable (and pleasant) sensations which enable one to judge it at a particular moment, in a particular place, and within a particular culture’ (Petrini 2007, 96). ‘[A] product is clean,’ Petrini tells us, ‘if it respects the earth and the environment, if it does not pollute, if it does not waste or overuse natural resources during its journey from the field to the table. To use a more technical term, a product is clean to the extent that its production process meets certain criteria of naturalness, if it is *sustainable*’ (Petrini 2007, 114). Finally, he writes: ‘In food production, the word “fair” connotes social justice, respect for workers and their know-how, rurality and the

²⁸ Flock owners focusing on milk production and cheese making rather than on wool and/or meat production began to stagger lambing throughout the year so as to have a constant number of ewes giving milk.

²⁹ Accounts of changing consumer preferences provided to us by producers themselves were confirmed by Castelhana (2008) and Saramago (2008).

country life, pay adequate to work, gratification in producing well, and the definitive revaluation of the small farmer, whose historical position in society has always been last' (Petrini 2007, 135).

Petrini's book surprisingly fails to engage with the vibrant debates being had today in both academic and public circles about food quality, agricultural sustainability and food justice, among other things. The work harkens back not only to a simpler time but also, more importantly, to a simpler conceptualization of what more probing analysis has demonstrated to be a complex set of issues. In this section, however, we focus on how Slow Food's simplified, romanticized vision has, in the case of Serpa cheese, actually caused the organization to work against its stated objectives of fostering the production of food that is 'good, clean and fair'.

We start by asking, in light of the historical narrative we have presented above, whether or not Presidium organizers' wish to (re)produce *Serpa Velho* favours the production of 'good' food. The answer is far from simple. The Presidium asserts that Serpa made from Merino milk and aged in the cheese room rafters on straw mats for at least 6 months was/is better than Serpa made from Lacaune milk and aged in refrigerated stores for only 30 days. But 'good' and 'better' are inescapably subjective terms, whose truth lies in the actual judgement of real people. Petrini has written: 'No one has the right to judge someone else's food on the basis of their own "cultural" taste: if we accept the description of food as a language, it becomes a means of communication, and in order to judge it, we must recognize the categories of the good which have codified it, as a language, in that particular culture. We must learn other culinary languages' (Petrini 2007, 108). Alas, Slow Food has struggled to take these words seriously (see also Lotti 2010). The organization has been loathe to recognize the 'culinary languages', or food 'cultures', or 'tastes' of middle-class consumers, such as Portugal's postwar urbanites, instead suggesting that such people are in need of 'taste education'. More legitimate in Slow Food's vision are the 'culinary languages', food 'cultures' or 'tastes' of 'locals' – a vaguely defined category of people who may be found anywhere but who, in the Slow Food narrative, always resist global consumerism. Accordingly, the Serpa Presidium grounds its claims to authenticity in the assertion that 'local people prefer' *Serpa Velho*. As we have seen, however, shifting patterns of consumption over recent decades suggest otherwise. The Serpa case shows that tastes are never unmitigated perceptions of some natural expression of 'goodness'. Indeed, tastes are circumscribed by historical contingencies, and change with changing times and conditions. For the landless labourers of the lower Alentejo during the period of the *latifundium*, taste and necessity were mutually constitutive. They 'preferred' harder aged cheeses not only because they were familiar, and 'right', but also because, needing to conserve milk fat and protein throughout the summer and autumn months, they could not sensibly prefer softer cheeses. Landowners, who were less reliant on cheese as a sources of fat and protein and who had greater 'choice' in what they ate, in fact often chose to eat softer, younger cheeses. When the economy of rural Alentejo shifted, improving the lot of the working classes, the sociological landscape as well as the factors in the equation by which 'locals' calculated what was 'good' changed. Harder aged cheeses are no longer 'preferred' by most.³⁰

³⁰ Some even contest the superiority of cheese made from Merino milk. While Merino milk does have higher levels of protein than the milk of Lacaune and Bordaleira ewes (Bettencourt et al. 1998), and while many have asserted that Serpa made from Merino milk is simply better cheese (Amaral 1996, 34), taste tests run by Carlos Bettencourt – who has spent most of his career working to preserve 'heritage breeds' on the *Herdade da Abóbada* and who has much invested in the idea that the Merino have distinctive, positive traits – failed to prove any discernable difference between cheese made from Merino milk and cheese made from the milk of Lacaune or Bordaleira (Bettencourt et al. 1998). See also Roseiro et al. (2005).

Changing local preferences have prompted and been reinforced by changing productive practices. The cheese makers we visited who sold harder aged cheeses sold very little of it and generally told us that they did not produce these cheeses intentionally. In fact, they often described these as ‘failed’ cheeses. Tiago Varela Elias of the *Monte da Torre Varela* told us: ‘It’s the cheese that decides if it will be *amanteigado* or *velho*, not the cheese maker.’ He explained that if a cheese ‘stopped working’ in the first days of aging – in other words, if its fermentation stalled – and if it failed to develop ‘a belly’ as *amanteigado* cheeses should, he set it aside to age longer (Elias 2008). According to Carlos Castelhana, the inverse was true in the past, when only ‘good’ cheeses could be aged for extended periods. Serpa makers today follow different recipes to produce cheeses that develop flavour more quickly (Castelhana 2008). Even if Presidium producers might in future return to older recipes, however, the fact that lower-quality harder aged cheeses have been sold by Serpa makers for some time now raises significant concerns for any future of *Serpa Velho*. Following the establishment of the Serpa DOC in 1987, some producers paid the cost of certification only for their poorest-quality cheeses, using this new mark of quality to dump otherwise unmarketable products. With productive methods likely to be tuned in the foreseeable future to the much greater market for softer, younger cheese, the Slow Food Presidium designation could all too easily be used similarly to sell ‘failed’ *amanteigado* cheeses.

In light of relevant historical complexities, the case for *Serpa Velho* being ‘fair’ is even more dubious than the case for it being ‘good’. In Petrini’s definition of ‘fair’, above, defence of the producers of quality foods is the heart of the matter. Slow Food presidia are cast as the principal means of accomplishing this. In the case of Serpa, however, it cannot truly be asserted that *Serpa Velho* producers actually exist – and can therefore be defended – in the present day. No commercial producer – not even Presidium members – makes cheese from Merino milk today.³¹ Under ASAE enforcement of EU regulations, no one ages their cheese in the rafters on reed mats. And those who do age their cheese longer than 30 days do so only when – and because – it has ‘failed’. Rather than protecting existing producers, a Presidium might, of course, facilitate the revival of ‘traditional’ practices and products. But owing to the same factors that caused Serpa producers to abandon these practices, none of the cheese makers we spoke with actually wished to make *Serpa Velho* today. In today’s labour market, we were told, few if any would be willing to rise at 3 a.m. to milk Merino by hand. Even if Merino could be machine milked – as they have so far been only on the government-run *Herdade da Abóbada* (Bettencourt 2008) – the issue of lower yields is decisive. When we asked Jaime Borges Lopes if he had ever considered raising Merino sheep for cheese making, he exclaimed, ‘I have to make a living!’³² He explained that all of his costs – infrastructure, labour, veterinary charges and so on – would remain the same, but that his yields would fall to 10–15 per cent of what he now makes (Lopes 2008). Others with whom we spoke invariably agreed that Merino milk yields were too low to be viable in today’s market. Under these circumstances, it would seem the antithesis of ‘fair’ to expect producers to make Serpa cheese from Merino milk.

None of the cheese makers we visited expressed a desire to return to aging their cheese in the rafters either. In the face of EU regulations requiring that cheese not come into contact with porous materials, and that temperatures be strictly and accurately controlled during aging, cheese makers in other EU countries have successfully argued not only that methods in

³¹ Most of the producers we visited made cheese from the milk of Lacaune sheep, although two also used the milk of Lacaune–Merino crossbreeds. Only the government-run *Herdade da Abóbada*, which did not need to turn a profit, made Serpa exclusively from the milk of Merino sheep.

³² Cf. Luetchford and Pratt (2011), who explore how small organic cooperatives in Andalusia have grappled with the need to make a living while attempting to create an alternative to the global food system.

contradiction with these regulations are safe, but also that abandoning these methods would alter the essential characteristics of the cheeses they make. In such cases, ‘derogations’ to these rules have been granted by the EU. But Serpa makers have not applied for such derogations, and those with whom we spoke expressed no interest in doing so. As we have seen, aging Serpa on reed mats in the rafters was a notoriously unpredictable process – one that failed frequently. Most producers we visited could ill afford the losses that such risks would inevitably entail.

Most Serpa makers were also disinclined to produce harder aged cheeses – or to make any more of it than dictated by the failure of their softer cheeses. José Bule explained to us that although he might sell harder aged cheeses for more per unit, he lacked the space to age his cheeses any longer than he did. Even if he had the space, he told us, he would not be able to do so. Aging cheese constitutes an investment through time, and Bule could not tie up his limited financial resources (Bule 2008).³³ Jaime Borges Lopes told us that harder aged cheeses not only cost more to produce but also lost weight as they dried out, meaning that the longer they aged, the higher the price one had to charge per kilogram of cheese to fetch the same price per litre of milk. Lopes made them from time to time, he told us, but sold them for only a bit more per cheese than younger cheeses, meaning that he did not recover his investment (Lopes 2008). François Vez told us that his aged cheeses fetched a *lower* price per weight than his *amanteigado* cheeses (Vez 2008). In light of this, the Presidium call for cheese makers to produce harder aged cheeses – to invest more work, more time and more money, and ultimately to earn less – is also hardly fair.

Regional historian Alfredo Saramago told us: ‘The presidium is trying to preserve something that has already died. It is simply not viable to talk of people returning to work under the conditions of the past to make “quality food”’ (Saramago 2008). Others similarly conceived of the Presidium agenda as Slow Food calling for poor people to work harder to make delicacies for the rich (e.g. Maia 2008). The Slow Food response to such accusations has long been ‘We don’t pay enough for our food.’ To this end, presidia are meant to raise the prices that producers can obtain for their products by promoting them as ‘quality’ foods. Some presidia have in fact accomplished this. Attainment of presidium status is much sought after by producers in Italy, where the Slow Food mark of distinction is widely respected, and where recognition by the organization can boost demand, and price, with immediate effect.

Marketing *Serpa Velho* as a ‘quality food’, however, greatly contradicts the product’s defining history. As we have seen, Serpa was rarely marketed at all in the period of the *latifundium*, instead being part and parcel of a poverty wage. This legacy marks the cheese to this day. Wages may have risen, but rural Alentejo remains economically depressed. Cash may have replaced payment in kind, but budgets remain tight. Most of the population shops at low-end supermarkets. Few can afford to pay more for their food. The majority of Serpa producers we visited sold *most* of their cheese – including, especially, their harder aged cheeses (Vez 2008) – to local residents at prices *they* could afford. Raising prices to incentivize producers to make *Serpa Velho* would undoubtedly be perceived as *unfair* by local customers – a view that no producer with whom we spoke saw fit to challenge.

Following the success of presidia elsewhere, Serpa Presidium organizers have looked further afield. However, whereas Italian presidia have often tapped into a vibrant national market niche in regional ‘quality’ foods, such a niche is virtually non-existent in Portugal, one of the poorest

³³ Ex-*roupeiros* such as Bule often aged their cheeses for only 10 days or so (Lopes 2008). Because most did not seek DOC certification for their cheese, but sold it instead as *Queijo de Ovelha*, they were not subject to the DOC requirement that cheese be aged for at least 30 days.

nations in Europe (Maia 2008).³⁴ Beyond this, the Serpa Presidium has envisioned reaching the international market niche in 'heritage foods' of which the network of presidium producers and consumers convened at events such as Slow Food's biennial *Salone Internazionale del Gusto* and its biennial *Cheese* festival are a vital component. Presidium organizers placed great hope in the idea that Slow Food members – including Italians in particular, who greatly appreciate hard aged sheep's milk cheeses – might constitute a lucrative market for *Serpa Velho*. But according to Portugal's leading purveyor of quality cheeses, Manuel Maia, the idea is ill conceived. Serpa simply cannot compete with Italian *Pecorinos* and Spanish *Machengo* in Italy, Spain and beyond, he told us. Consumers who liked *Pecorinos* generally preferred them to Portuguese sheep's milk cheeses, whereas consumers who wanted the taste of a cheese made with *cardoon* could find better cheeses, whether in Spain or even elsewhere in Portugal (Maia 2008).

The Presidium's eagerness to foster consumption of its 'local' food 'at a distance' (see also Gaytán 2004, 100; Fonte 2006, 215) – its willingness to 'fake localness' (*pace* Miele and Murdoch 2003, 38) – may be in concert with other presidia but, nonetheless, undermines pursuit of the last of Petrini's three objectives, namely food that is 'clean'. Petrini has written: 'A distributor of food products should not transport products indiscriminately from one side of the world to the other merely for his own convenience. Food mile pollution would increase and serious imbalances might result' (Petrini 2007, 126). Yet this is exactly what Presidium organizers envisioned when confronted with the limitations of the local and national markets for *Serpa Velho*.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BETTER HISTORY TO ACHIEVING BETTER FOOD

Like the harder aged Serpa cheeses remembered by so many of those we visited – denser and richer than their dry crusts might have suggested, and lending themselves to be eaten in small portions, over time – the history of Serpa cheese is more complex than first meets the eye, calling for a slow, considered examination. Instead, the Serpa Cheese Presidium engaged only superficially with the product's history. And in seeking to elevate *Serpa Velho* – so recently a poverty food – to the status of 'quality food', Slow Food gourmands seem to have bitten off rather more than they could swallow.

By the time we arrived in Serpa, only 6 months after meeting Presidium delegates in Bra, the Presidium coordinator had left his job as cheese maker on the *Herdade da Quinta de Dom Luís* and abandoned the Presidium. No one had replaced him as coordinator, and the Presidium had stalled. Several people with whom we spoke told us that the problem was far bigger than the Presidium itself. Jaime Borges Lopes' attempts to organize a *Confraria do Queijo Serpa* had foundered for years on producers' mutual distrust and lack of enthusiasm for a shared project. 'Every cheese maker speaks ill of every other,' one well-placed interviewee told us, 'and they resist every attempt to organize them.' Our interviews confirmed this. Fractious relations between cheese makers were rooted in the region's historical complexities, as those with different social backgrounds and different present-day interests saw the future of Serpa cheese differently. *Herdade* owners conceived of themselves as stewards of the Serpa tradition, for they made cheese on the land where it had been made for centuries. Ex-*roupeiros* claimed to be the bearers of 'traditional knowledge', and thus the cheese's legitimate heirs. Social class, and party affiliation, inflected these divides, as did bitter conflicts between, and even within, families. Presidium organizers failed to understand these dynamics, and in fact exacerbated them. The principal proponent of the Presidium was João Nunes, a newcomer not only to cheese making

³⁴ Slow Food has failed to attract members in Portugal for precisely this reason (Maia 2008; Saramago 2008).

but also to the region. A successful Setúbal-based landscape architect whose father (an ex-director of one of the largest banks in Portugal) had gifted him the *Herdade da Quinta de Dom Luís*, Nunes was married to an Italian woman, and spent considerable time working and teaching in Italy. Among those he came to know there, Slow Food enjoyed considerable cache, and he subsequently embraced the idea of a Presidium project to defend Serpa cheese, which he – or rather a hired technician – had only just started making (Lopes 2008; Maia 2008). He partnered with two of the largest producers in the region (including another newcomer, whose plant was among the most modern we visited) to form a marketing consortium and, despite his own cheese failing – (he had suspended production when we visited) – campaigned to convince others to join not only the Presidium but also the consortium (on terms considered unfavourable by most Serpa producers; Elias 2008). Slow Food was thus perceived among most producers we spoke to not as an ally of the small, traditional and artisanal, but instead as a ‘brand’ used by the large, modern and industrial to legitimate their control of the regional cheese trade by *painting* it as small, traditional and artisanal.

The complex history presented above sheds lights on the problems faced by the Presidium not only in mobilizing cheese makers to join together but also in getting them to ‘return’ to more ‘traditional’ methods of production. Whether or not a better understanding of this history might help resolve the Presidium’s problems is another question altogether.³⁵ We doubt that it could, for the historical portrait arising from our data is fundamentally and, perhaps, irrevocably, at odds with Slow Food’s foundational narrative. Without classless peasants making and eating timeless foods of unquestionable quality, Slow Food has no hero in its struggle against contemporary consumer capitalism – only members who wish to eat ‘better’ than ‘ordinary’ consumers, and producers who may or may not find it profitable to meet their demands. Without a romanticized tradition as point of reference, Slow Food’s aestheticization of food fails to transcend temporal and social divides (*pace* Miele and Murdoch 2002, 325), becoming nothing more than niche consumption through which members ‘craft identities’ through discerning acquisition of products approved by Slow Food. Without an ‘authenticating’ context in which to ‘embed’ the foods they celebrate, Slow Food fails to ‘de-commodify’ these products, and instead merely creates more limited, more prized commodities attainable only by a privileged few (see also Leitch 2000; Lotti 2010).

Whether or not Slow Food can take lessons from the more complex history presented above is ultimately not our concern. Following Montanari, who has suggested that ‘care’ is a better watchword than ‘slow’ when it comes to food (Montanari 1996), we argue the need for more care in the examination of the history and sociology of our food, as well as in the drawing of lessons from such enquiry. We have endeavoured to provide, as an example of this, a ‘careful’ analysis of the relevant history and sociology of Serpa cheese. Such an analysis allows us to see all of the many different kinds of people who have made and eaten Serpa cheese over tens,

³⁵ The question is not merely rhetorical. Although the brochure we were given in Bra gave the impression that the Presidium already existed, it was in fact still in formation. The coordinator informed us that, in order for them to obtain Presidium status, research needed to be conducted to determine what methods of production historically defined Serpa cheese, in what geographical region Serpa cheese had been produced, and what taste preferences had determined when and how Serpa cheese was eaten. As he and his counterparts did not have the time or the skills to conduct such research, he in fact invited us to do so for them. Knowing that the questions animating our research would be different than these, we accepted only their generous offer of accommodation, but took no money from them, and pursued our own line of enquiry with the promise to share any relevant findings with them (cf. Lotti 2010). All other costs of the research were paid by a grant from the British Academy. We worked alongside an undergraduate student from Slow Food’s University of Gastronomic Sciences, who based coursework on her research findings. This student received financial support for her travels from the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity.

hundreds, even thousands of years as agents of both continuity and change – as (re)inventors of tradition – albeit with widely disparate views on what was/is good, clean and fair. We conclude that if we are to make food better, cleaner and fairer in the future, we must start with a more careful understanding of the actual experiences, acts and motives of real people such as these.

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