Countryside and the City, Food and the Imaginary:
Perceptions of the Rural at the Table

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, Paulo and one of his teenage daughters, Julia, suffered from itchiness all over their bodies. This skin problem only disappeared when, following the recommendation of Mãe Oxum, they stopped drinking “carton milk”.

For the purposes of this paper, we will start with a story heard in the kitchen of Luisa and Paulo, who live in a popular neighbourhood in Porto Alegre. At the time of the interview, the couple, parents of a young boy and two teenage daughters, was in their fifties. But before hearing their story, certain elements that are present in the narrative will have to be looked at.

The first concerns the couple’s religion. Paulo and Luisa classify themselves as spiritists. Paulo is a Kardecist, while Luisa practices Umbanda, and is actually a medium. Umbanda, according to Prandi (2004), originated in Rio de Janeiro at the beginning of the twentieth century, through the synthesis of old traditional African cults with Kardecist spiritism, which

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1. In this paper data collected in different rural parts of Rio Grande do Sul (in the south of Brazil) and in the state capital, Porto Alegre, shall be looked at. In relation to Porto Alegre—the city in which all non-rural inhabitants mentioned in the paper live—in 2001 and 2002, 25 semi-structured interviews were carried out (Menasche 2003). The observations concerning the rural families are based on ethnographic research carried out in locations in the North and South-Central regions of the state in 2000 (Menasche 2003), and in the Vale do Taquari region between 2004 and 2005 (Menasche 2007). It is also worth noting that the names of all those interviewed have been substituted by fictitious names.
arrived from France at the end of the nineteenth century. According to Magnani (2002), as in other possession cults, in umbanda communication between the supernatural sphere and the world of men takes place “through the incorporation of spiritual entities in the group and in the bodies of the initiated,” i.e., mediums. Magnani (2002) also states that while in Kardecist spiritism “the spirits that come into the sessions are individualised and recognised through the stories of their past lives, umbandistas create more generic categories where the references to personal lives are replaced by representations such as, for example, caboclos and pretos-velhos.” Oxum, or Mãe

Oxum, as Luisa prefers, is one of these spiritual entities.

The second element to be pointed out concerns the industrialisation and commercialisation of liquid milk. Until the beginning of the 1990s milk was predominantly sold in Brazil in plastic containers: in 1990, 95 percent of industrialised liquid milk reached consumers packaged in plastic bags. This milk came to be popularly known as “bag milk.” In 2002, however, tetrapack packages, of the long life milk type—“carton milk”—accounted for 74 percent of all liquid milk sold in the country.

The difference in the manufacturing processes between the two products, according to the Brazilian Long Life Milk Association (ABLV), is a result of the temperature to which the milk is submitted. While the “bag milk” is pasteurized, the carton milk is submitted to the ultra-pasteurisation process at

2. To give the reader an idea of the percentage breakdown of the main religions in the country, it is worth noting that in 2000, 73.7 percent of Brazilians classified themselves as Catholics, 15.4 percent as evangelicals, 1.4 percent as spiritists, 0.34 percent as having Afro-Brazilian religions (0.26 percent Umbandistas and the other practitioners of candomble), 1.8 percent as other religions and 7.3 percent as having no religion (Pierucci, 2004). It should be noted, as highlighted by Prandi (2004), that, whether due the relatively recent prohibition and persecution of Afro-Brazilian religions by governmental authorities or to the prejudice the black population suffers from, it is still very common, “even now, when freedom of religious choice is part of Brazilian life, for many followers of Afro-Brazilian religions to still declare that they are Catholics,” which results in the underestimation of Afro-Brazilian religions in the official Brazilian census.

3. The meaning of “mãe” is “mother”.

4. Data provided by the Brazilian Association of Long Life Milk (ABLV). Available at: http://www.ablv.org.br/index.cfm?fuseaction. Accessed 04/07/2003. All information referring to ABLV mentioned in this article is obtained from this site.
very high temperatures, for which reason it is called UHT (Ultra High Temperature). The conservation properties of long life milk are a result of this, which removes the need to boil the milk before consumption and allows it to be kept, if unopened, for up to 120 days outside the fridge.

Having said this, let us now turn to the story.

Paulo: Milk, we used to buy carton milk, although recently we have been avoiding it... because it was giving us skin problems especially in the girl and in me. [Was milk found to be the problem?] Yes, we got information through a medium that it was the milk... due to a preservative in the milk. Carton milk actually does not go sour, it does not go off, we leave it outside the fridge and it does not go off, so it must have very strong preservatives.... All of us had some sort of allergy, and it was strongest in Julia and in me, so I stopped drinking large amounts of carton milk, I began to drink powdered milk, and this solved the problem. We got, as I have told you, the information through spiritual means. And we tried it and I proved that this was the reason.

Luisa: I work in a casa espírita [spiritist house], I am an umbandista, and there I asked -and here there is space for the doctors as well, who come in through the Kardecist part- but I did not ask a doctor, I went to Mãe Oxum, an entity in umbanda. So I asked her, I talked about the itchiness, the allergies, I said “I don’t know if it comes from the dogs, or something that we are eating.” I was not feeling any itchiness at all, I looked for fleas and couldn’t find any, I couldn’t find anything. But since it was very dry it could have been dust, cement; we work doing things with cement. So she said it was milk, which had a preservative that was doing us harm. The carton of milk, it has some preservatives, a few things added, right? So they [her husband and daughter] watched this. I changed the brand, but it made no difference. Then he [her husband] proved it, he began to drink powder milk, Julia too.

**Dirty and Clean: Representations of Industrialised Food**

According to the spiritual diagnosis, Paulo and Julia’s skin ailment was identified as being caused by something that, with the aim of ensuring its preservation, was added during the industrialisation process of long life milk. The

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5. When referring to a spiritual centre, the term “work” means acting as a medium.
elimination of carton milk from the diet of those suffering from the ailment, as recommended by Mãe Oxum, cured them.

It is interesting to note the arguments given by the Brazilian Long Life Milk Association in their site to explain the durability of the product:

Ultra pasteurisation and aseptic packaging allows Long Life Milk to last longer without the addition of any preservative agent. Contrary to false popular belief, formaldehyde and antibiotics are not used in the preservation of food, neither in Long Life Milk or any other food. The stabiliser is the only food additive allowed in natural Long Life Milk. Some Long Life Milk brands use sodium citrate in the product as a stabiliser. The stabiliser is not a preservative and is not harmful to health. It is an innocuous food additive that functions as a technological aid in the production of Long Life Milk. The function of sodium citrate is to avoid the sedimentation of milk, and it is added to the milk before ultra pasteurisation. The addition is optional, in other words the producer decides whether or not to use it. Citrate is an organic acid naturally present in milk. (Original italics).

ABLV, in its dialogue with the supposed “false popular belief,” highlights the existence in the social imagination of the suspicion that preservatives are used in long life milk. This suspicion was also noted among the inhabitants of Porto Alegre who were interviewed.

Questioned about their eating habits, most interviewees said that they used long life milk, mentioning the advantages of being able to store the product —allowing the inclusion of milk in weekly or monthly shopping in large supermarkets— and that after being opened the milk lasts much longer. Some of those interviewed, however, considered that the milk in plastic bags is of a better quality or is healthier. Let us look at some extracts from the interviews:

Milk, I prefer “bag milk”. We buy carton milk because it is skimmed. We now have two cartons of milk, why? Because we cannot find “bag milk” everywhere. In [the small local shop], which is nearby, we cannot get it. I

6. In addition, it is worth noting that by adding the adjective natural to the product and the stabiliser—a question to which we will return later—ABLV intends to certify its harmlessness.

7. In relation to this, these were the two arguments given by Luisa when she was asked to explain why her husband and daughter had substituted carton milk with powder milk and not with “bag milk,” which goes off rapidly and cannot be stocked.
have got to go to [the large supermarket] to buy “bag milk,” so we have to go by car to buy it. In the bakery below us, you also cannot get it. Bakeries do not sell “bag milk” anymore. [And why do you prefer ‘bag milk?’] Because it does not have any additives, right? The other type, well they say it has no preservatives, but it does. Imagine, how could milk inside that thing not have any? And the other [bag milk] is more natural, it is just pasteurised. And the milk is practically there for you. (Lourdes)

[Do you buy carton milk?] No, “bag milk,” which I think is healthier, it comes from the cow.... I think that the other type, carton milk, has more preservatives. Do you know why carton milk does not come into this house? Not because it is more expensive, but because I get a taste of soy milk from it, which I don’t know why, which I think they mix with. And because my daughter, she was four or five months old when she started, I had been breast-feeding her.... At one time I would go to [the large supermarket], and I would buy two or three cartons. So my daughter began to suffer from diarrhoea. And the other boy also began to have problems with carton milk as well, which I never liked anyway. It also went sour very quick. [Carton milk?] Yes, carton milk. When I boiled it, I felt a different taste, a bitter taste, I didn’t like it. So I came to the conclusion... in the carton they have those things like ‘H,’ ‘V,’ things like that, those preservatives, things that I don’t understand. And I have always looked for healthier things, right, to consume what I think is safest... the healthiest. I do not drink, it doesn’t come into my house, carton milk. I prefer the other type. I think it is a fresher type of milk: healthier. It doesn’t have so many preservatives. [Even though you have to buy it every day?] Yes, even though I have to buy it all the time, I have to buy two litres of milk everyday, always, always.... So I always try to get the healthier things, things with fewer preservatives, as natural as possible. (Cleomar)

Thus, “bag milk,” especially due to the presumed absence of suspicious additives, and which is differentiated in this way from carton milk, is considered to be purer, healthier and more natural. Cleomar also mentioned that this is milk “from the cow,” as if milk in long life packages were not.

However, the presence of the “unknown” is not seen as a motive of suspicion by those interviewed only in relation to milk: “Sometimes you

8. A probable reference to the initials UHT (Ultra High Temperature), commonly printed on long life milk packages.

9. The idea that the presence of the unknown in the food is constitutive of a contemporary urban anxiety in relation to eating comes from the incorporation principle
don’t know what you are buying. You don’t know where it comes from, if it contains agro-chemicals, you don’t know what they put in to produce it. You don’t know if it is clean, you don’t know if it is dirty”. (Cleusa)

Amongst other items, fruit and greens bought in supermarkets, where the origin and production methods are not known by consumers, are considered to be dirty or impure. Therefore, for several of the interviewees from Porto Alegre washing and peeling suspect vegetables are practices described almost as a way of expurgating—physically but also symbolically—impurities in fruit and vegetables, thereby transforming them into food that can then be considered to be healthy.

That which is eaten should guarantee the health of the body. For this reason it is necessary to ensure the purity of the food, its integrity, seen as the absence of foreign elements in its constitution, which are commonly added in the production or industrial processing of food.

We can now return to the spiritual diagnosis of the skin ailments of Paulo and his daughter. According to Mãe Oxum the illness was caused by the presence of foreign substances in carton milk. By interrupting the consumption of the impure milk the illness was cured.

**FROM THE COUNTRY: IN THIS FOOD WE TRUST**

For many of the interviewees from Porto Alegre,\(^\text{10}\) the valorisation of the natural is constructed in counter-position to the artificial, a quality attributed to industrialised food:

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10. It is worth noting that among the interviewees there was an absence of diets such as vegetarianism or macrobiotics, or diets based on the consumption of exclusively organic vegetables, diets that, as shown by Ouédraogo (1998: 18-19) in a study of the visions and practices of Parisian consumers who are adept to organic eating, are an integral part of a lifestyle ruled by an ethic “that extremely valorises the simple life, nature and the natural, the artisan and the rustic... associated with health, ecology, purity and solidarity.”
Sauces which I like to make, I do by taste. Ready made sauces generally have a kind of strange taste, which I do not like. I like to get tomatoes, chop them up and make the sauce... I do not like canned food very much.... I like to sense the natural taste of food. (Gilberto)

As has been suggested by La Soudière (1995), it can be seen that as a reflection of the distrust of the modern, the natural and the rural are identified as authentic. Also in relation to the valorisation of the taste of the countryside, Eizner (1995) and Álvarez and Pinotti (2000) note the insipidity of the “average taste” that is characteristic of the agro-food industry which excludes strong flavours.

As a result, ready-made sauces and seasonings, frozen meals, cakes and pre-made soups, industrialised breads and pastries, tinned food and soft drinks are repeatedly condemned. To the detriment of these foods, the interviewees declared that they preferred home made sauces, yogurts, sweets, cakes, breads and pastries, free-range chickens and eggs, water and juice, fresh seasonings, vegetables and corn on the cob, and organic greens.

Thus, the natural, fresh, home-made, nearby and traditional are affirmed in opposition to the artificial, processed, industrialised, distant, and modern. Natural food is not just believed to taste better. In opposition to industrialised food it is seen as pure and therefore healthy. The adjectives related to natural are attributed to fresh food, or food bought in the street market (never supermarkets), organic food, or brought “from outside.”

The food brought “from outside” is food that comes from the countryside, from the rural environment, whose origin is directly associated with the producer. This can include food brought by the actual interviewee, or someone from the interviewee’s family, when visiting their regions of origin, or brought from there by a relative or acquaintance. It also covers food grown on a farm or plot of land near the city, or food acquired when travelling from producers on roadside stalls, food sold in fairs –both organic and non-organic– supposedly by the producers of the food, or finally food that in some way comes from the countryside –such as eggs brought by the “parking people” to sell–and reaches the city through channels other than those formally constituted.

Food from “the outside” is considered the best. In relation to greens, it is said that “even the leaves are softer.” Chicken, meat and milk “cannot be compared,” they “have another taste,” while those from the supermarket
“do not match them at all.” The eggs “from the chickens fed with corn, their yolks are bright red, very different.” Ruralness, more than any other attribute, seems to contain all the advantages that distinguish desirable food from industrialised food.

In relation to the perceptions of those people interviewed in Porto Alegre we can suppose that something similar occurs to what was indicated by Mathieu and Jolivet (1989) who, in looking at the theme of representations of nature in France, showed that urban common sense tended to associate the values attributed to nature and natural to the countryside and the rural.

In this way, the rural tends to be qualified as natural. This is even the case when, due to the intensive characteristics of agricultural production –including the use of various types of agro-chemicals– it is obviously not so.

Therefore, as suggested by Eizner (1995) for the French case, we can perhaps identify here in the observed valorisation of the natural and the rural, myths of the natural and the artisan, something like the search for the consumption of “images of lost tastes.”

Uses and Meanings of Polenta: Perceptions of the Rural

Based on the affirmation of ruralness as a desired attribute of food, and having noted an idealisation of the countryside among the interviewed inhabitants of Porto Alegre, we can now ask how those who live in the countryside regard it.

However, before briefly looking at this point, it is important to bear in mind that in recent decades the work and life dynamics of rural families in the family-farming segment in Brazil has been profoundly changed, especially in the south of the country where agriculture is predominantly modernised and largely carried out by descendants of European immigrants (generally Italian, German and Polish). The intensive use of raw materials and machinery in agricultural production and the increased integration of this sector in the agro-industrial sector, on the one hand, and the reduction in family size and the ease of access, resulting from improvements in the transportation system and communication technologies, to ‘urban’ goods and values, on the other, are some of the aspects that illustrate this transformation. Also part of this new scenario is the ageing of the rural population, directly related to the crisis in the previ-
ously dominant models of succession among these farmers, as well as the growing presence of non-agricultural employment. As a result, the current material and symbolic mobility between the countryside and the city, responsible for the intense transformation in the work and lives of these rural families may be associated with the degradation of the agricultural and food-related know-how of these colonos\textsuperscript{11} and the forms of sociability of rural communities.

Nevertheless, the more attentive observer will notice that, among these farmers, crops and livestock on which the so-called modern technology is intensively used coexist with traditional techniques and that a significant production of food is for self-consumption by families, associated with guaranteeing their food safety and in this way their strategies for social reproduction. In the same way, this observer will also note that, contrary to what occurs with employees hired on a permanent basis, working for a number of days for relatives and neighbours is a common practice among this type of farmers. Another thing that will be observed is the circulation of the latest generation of transgenic seeds through traditional systems of reciprocity and that the adhesion to new technology occurs through communitarian mechanisms of coercion which establish and update the standard that is considered for the ‘good colono.’ Furthermore, while many rural youths see the combination of urban employment and living in rural areas as a stage that precedes definitive migration, others see it as a transitory stage that allows them to have access to their own income, which would not be possible through the family production unit, until the father passes on to the heir the condition of being responsible for the property and the family. In addition, it will be seen that numerous community organisations exist, both religious and non-religious, whose activities penetrate the lives

\textsuperscript{11} The term colono originates in the colonial administration: “for the state colonos were all those who were given a plot of land in areas earmarked for colonisation” (Seyferth 1992: 80). The appropriation of the administrative category by farmers of European origin as the defining point of their identities resulted, according to the author, in the exclusion of the so-called Caboclos or Brasileiros, including all those of Portuguese, black and/or indigenous origin. Therefore, for Seyferth (1992: 80), “colono is a designative category for the peasant... and its registered mark is the possession of a colônia... a small family property.” Thus, in the south of Brazil, farmers descended from European immigrants, with the exception of the Portuguese who live and work on the land in a family production unit, are recognised and known as colonos.
of these families; and noticed as well as in different ritualistic moments, from festivities to elections, the locally operated hierarchies and classifications, even when linked to more wide-ranging territories.

In different situations during the research carried out with rural families we found side by side at the table locally made bread and industrialised jam, homemade salami and ready made noodles, colonial cheese and the pre-made mix for the soup, salad collected in the vegetable garden and sardines taken from the tin, *polenta* and mortadella. The actual production of the family unit, responsible for most of the food consumed in daily meals, divides space with industrialised products –which here, unlike what was observed among the interviewees living in Porto Alegre, were not negatively valorised.

Cooking on a wood-fired stove, the use of pork lard in the preparation of dishes, as well as, in the case of farmers of Italian descent, the use of *polenta* –respectively a way of preparing food, an ingredient and a dish– are some of the items which –when, as shown by Garine (1987: 4) “man feeds himself in accordance to the society to which he belongs”– can be seen to be emblematic of a *colona* identity.

We shall see shortly how *polenta*, a dish prepared through the cooking of corn flour in water, became the food that marked this identity.

Since the beginning of the sixteenth century, corn –a plant of American origin– has been present in various European regions, with its widespread diffusion being attributed, on the one hand, to its elevated yield –in comparison with other cereals planted for much longer on the continent, such as rye or wheat– and, on the other hand, the ease with which it substituted other cereals in the preparation of gruels, common throughout Europe since early times (Flandrin & Montanari 1998; Contreras & Gracia 2004). In this way *polenta* became a basic food for peasants in Veneto in the north of Italy, where from 1875 onwards they would migrate to the south of Brazil.

In accordance with the reports of farmers descending from Italians –especially until the 1970s, after which Brazilian agriculture, particularly in the south of the country, went through an intense process of modernisation, while at the same time the size of rural families declined– the preparation of *polenta* for the evening meal was a daily practice. It was customary for the housewife to return from the fields earlier than other family members to prepare *polenta*. When she arrived home, the pan was already on the fire, the water was boiling.
and the flour was being cooked: helping in the preparation of polenta was a task of children and nonas. It would take hours of continual stirring to get the polenta ready. Then while still warm it would be put on a board, where after cooling a bit it would be cut, and would be eaten with the sauce that was left over from lunch or with cheese or salami. “There was no bread, wheat was for sale,” said one farmer, explaining how the following morning the polenta would be toasted over the wood fire –polenta brustolada– and then eaten with coffee.

Although not eaten as regularly, polenta is still present at the table of these rural families and their descendants. Nevertheless, while previously –both in Italy and when they arrived in Brazil– polenta was the food that, even in times of shortage, ensured the survival of these farmers, we can now perceive different uses and meanings of polenta, which in turn is associated with different perceptions of the rural among those who live and work in the countryside.

Let us see what this says to us in two different research situations.

In the first, a strong rejection of the rural environment can be identified among young people. In this context, for example, it seems to be common among rural youth to be ashamed of being rural dwellers, to lie about their addresses and to make it appear like they live in the city. Or, as I was told, the desire of a girl to marry a farmer –“you have to marry a colono”– to be interpreted, by both parties, as a curse. It is not hard to guess that polenta is not a much appreciated food among these young people.

In the second research situation, we have observed in the last five years in an agricultural community of farmers descending from Italian immigrants, the process of the constitution of a festival as a tradition. The festival commemorates a date alluding to Italian immigration and brings together hundreds of people from the area and increasingly from all over the region. During the festival each family brings food and drink which are shared. Italian traditions are also revived in the celebration of mass and through songs, dances, drama, games, clothes and objects that seek to recreate the customs of the time when polenta was present at the table every day. Furthermore, in the festival polenta brustolada, toasted on a large plate imitating the way they were toasted on wood fires, is a special attraction.

In this way, similar to what Ramos (2007) showed in the study carried among farmers in Maquiné (Rio Grande do Sul), it is possible to identify among the countryside inhabitants observed, the existence of contradictory movements in relation to the valorisation of polenta, which we can associate with different perceptions of the rural.

The rejection of polenta and also the valorisation of industrialised foods, contain the manifestation –on a daily basis and expressed most emphatically by young people– of the symbolic depreciation of the rural, a movement that is not recent and which was accentuated through the modernisation process of agriculture.

Another movement can also be noted, which is specially manifested on festive occasions, when the food related to a colona identity –including polenta– is positively valued. The affirmation of this identity does not seem to be constituted essentially in opposition to industrialised foods, but rather through the connection with a past time and temporality revived in the festival, which –as shown in Champagne’s study (1987)– is produced to a large extent in response to an urban quest for an idealised rural, and the consequent demand for landscape, customs, festivals, history, tourism and food, including polenta.

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