# Delicacies Real and Imagined: Food and Drink as a Diplomatic Gift

*Paul Brummell*

Abstract: The paper explores the changing use of food and drink as a diplomatic gift, comparing sixteenth-century Venice and the twenty-first century USA. Venice used diplomatic gifts of food in two contexts. First, as hosts, in entertaining and provisioning visiting diplomatic missions, its products advertising the wealth and sophistication of the republic. Second, as prestigious gifts to foreign rulers. Cheeses were gifted to Mamluk sultans alongside textiles and furs. Food and drink was offered in quantity, and intended to be consumed. Diplomatic gifts of food and drink received by US presidents George W Bush and Barack Obama were in contrast destined never to be consumed, but rather handled 'pursuant to US Secret Service policy'. Such gifts are diplomatic signals, to showcase the prized foods of the gifting country, promote exports, and take advantage of the associations of food with friendship and conviviality to stress the warmth of the relationship between the leaders. Diplomatic gifts of food and drink to officials in the modern era are often made in small quantities, designed not to exceed the value at which they may be retained and enjoyed by the recipient, supporting strategies of gastrodiplomacy and developing the social relationships at the heart of diplomatic gifting. Twenty-first century diplomatic gifts of food are thus more symbolic gifts. In the case of gifts to US presidents, the taste of the food is left to the imagination.



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The giving and receiving of diplomatic gifts dates to prehistory, and is a part of diplomatic engagement across the world and across all eras. For French sociologist Marcel Mauss, whose 1925 study *The Gift* is a seminal text on gift exchange,[1] the gift economy had a social function. Mauss distinguishes between two forms of exchange. In gift exchange, a social relationship is created and maintained by gifting, an act binding giver and receiver together.[2] In commodity exchange, the relationship between buyer and seller generates no enduring link.[3] The need for diplomacy arises when two geographically separated and distinct groups must conduct business. This is facilitated by an ongoing social relationship between the groups, and hence the importance of diplomatic gifts as a means of establishing and maintaining such a relationship.

Mauss identifies three obligations underpinning the gift exchanges he studied, from the Trobriand Islanders of Melanesia to indigenous peoples of the northwest coast of America. These are the obligation to give presents, that to receive them, and

that to repay gifts received.[4] If these obligations are not met, the social relationship with the other party is repudiated.[5] Gifts, then, require reciprocation, building a system of exchange that while voluntary in outward appearance is in fact obligatory.

The choice of gifted object is usually that of the giver, and serves their objectives. These are not necessarily benign. The citizens of Troy would have done better to look their gift horse in the mouth. Gifts may be used to underline authority and power, for example in lavish gifting to a recipient unable to match its beneficence. They may be offered in the expectation of a greater return. A gift offered as a bribe would fall into that category. Or they may reflect insecurity about a relationship, and be used as an attempt to fortify it.

An enormous range of objects have been deployed as diplomatic gifts, from armour to zebras. They tend to stand out from items of quotidian exchange, as objects intended to generate wonderment in the recipient. Islamic art expert Doris Behrens-Abouseif, in a study of gift exchange with the Mamluk Sultanate of medieval Egypt, identifies the Islamic concept of *tuhaf,* or 'marvels' as an essential attribute of the chosen gift.[6] The use of exotic animals as diplomatic gifts, from the elephant gifted to Charlemagne by Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid to the 'panda diplomacy' of modern-day China, speaks to the capacity of such creatures to enrapture the recipient.

A gift might also be chosen as a calling card of the gifting polity, highlighting its technological sophistication or cultural achievements. The gifting of Meissen porcelain by eighteenth-century Saxon rulers underlined that country's success in uncovering the secrets of hard-paste porcelain manufacture where other European courts had failed.



Gifts might support export ambitions, by showcasing a product the gifting polity hopes to sell in the receiving one. This potentially jars with the objective that gifts should create a sense of wonder, and the export-promotion intent of diplomatic gifts tends to be limited to luxury items. Lord Macartney's ill-fated mission to China of 1793 aimed to open the Chinese market to British exports. Believing that the mission's gifts could be used to showcase the best British goods to the Chinese, manufacturer Matthew Boulton provided recommendations of fine examples of British wares, from buttons to candlesticks.[7] Macartney wanted however to distinguish the king's gifts to the emperor from simple trade goods, and items of this nature were sidelined in favour of gifts intended to speak to British achievements in science and technology.[8] The most eye-catching gift was a glass-cased planetarium, incorporating three clocks and embellished with ormolu pineapples. Macartney presumably glossed over the fact that this remarkable object was not British, but the work of a pastor and clockmaker from Württemberg.

Food and drink play a distinctive role as diplomatic gifts. This arises in part from their necessary place in diplomacy. Visiting envoys must eat. Dining occasions provide informal settings for discussions, breaking down the barriers experienced in audience halls or across negotiating tables, the act of breaking bread together serving as a mark of friendship.[9] Depending on the historical and cultural context, the host polity may be required to provide gifts of food and drink in various forms, whether providing a single meal or underwriting the full expenses of the visiting mission for the duration of its stay.

The role of food and drink as diplomatic gifts is not though restricted to their place as gifts necessary to the functioning of a diplomatic mission. They enjoy further specific advantages as gifts. Luxurious and unfamiliar food and drink products can inspire awe and wonder. They can be repositories of *tuhaf*. They can showcase the cuisine and agricultural wealth of the gifting country, their use as diplomatic gifts paralleling the current focus of many countries on gastrodiplomacy, in which a national cuisine is used as a form of soft power.[10] Furthermore, because of the association of eating and drinking with friendship and conviviality, diplomatic gifts of food and drink may be intended to hint at a warmth in the relationship between the two polities.

One further quality of gifts of food and drink is worth comment. Since they are objects designed to be ingested, acceptance of a gift of food or drink requires trust. Gifts of food and drink may serve therefore not just as symbols of a warm relationship, but also as tests of it.



Has the use of food and drink as a diplomatic gift changed over time? To explore this question we will look at the examples of sixteenth-century Venice and the twenty-first century United States of America.

## Diplomatic Gifts of Food and Drink in Sixteenth-Century Venice

Food and drink were used as a diplomatic gift by the Republic of Venice in the sixteenth century both to provide hospitality and sustenance for visiting diplomatic delegations, and as luxury gifts to foreign rulers. Cheese provides an example of its use in both contexts.

In common with many other powers at the time, the Venetian government viewed the provision of hospitality to visiting diplomatic delegations as its duty, covering accommodation, entertainment and food and drink. The latter in part took the form of elegant banquets. The hosts aimed to impress visitors with Venetian wealth and power through the sophistication and luxury of food and accompanying spectacle. The venue of the banquet also served this objective. Thus a banquet organised in honour of a Muscovite embassy visiting Venice in 1582 en route to Rome, was held in the Arsenal, a symbol of Venetian maritime power.[11]

Food and drink also came in the form of a gift package provided to the visiting envoy on arrival, known as *refrescamenti*, or 'refreshments'. Its contents were luxurious in character, with a strong showing of Venetian specialities. This would typically include, sugar, nuts, spices, including cinnamon and pepper, a range of fish or meat, fresh fruits and a barrel of Moscato wine, as well as sweet confections such as the sugar-coated fruits or nuts known as *confetti*.[12] The Venetians provided all the food required for the 23-day stay of the Muscovite delegation, and threw in the services of the doge's chef to prepare it. This was no small undertaking: the hospitality given to the Muscovite delegation cost Venice some 589 ducats, with food the largest component.[13] This sum rather pales though against the Venetian expenses for their spectacular reception for the future King Henri III of France in 1574, estimated at 100,000 ducats.[14] Venetian records show that the *refrescamenti* provided to the Muscovite delegation included four cheeses: mozzarella; the soft *giuncata; marzolino*, a sheep's cheese made from spring milk; and *piacentino*.[15]

Venice did not just deploy cheese in *refrescamenti* packages for visiting envoys. It was also a prestigious gift to foreign rulers. Turning back to the early sixteenth century, the relationship between Venice and the Mamluk Sultanate provides an example. The spice trade had long fuelled an interdependence between the two powers, though one always subject to stresses, such as over the policy introduced in the 1420s by Sultan Barsbay requiring Venice to buy some of the pepper at the heart of the trade from the sultan's warehouses. This was offered, of course, at inflated prices.[16] Despite such squalls, the lucrative nature of the trade meant that it had continued for centuries.



The landing in India in 1498 of Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama would change Venetian and Mamluk fortunes irreparably. Portugal could now bring spices to Lisbon by the new maritime route. This was not the only headache facing Egypt and Venice. The Ottoman threat loomed large, and indeed Venice was at war at the turn of the century. The response to these external challenges provoked further disputes between Venetians and Mamluks. Attempting to make up the declining income from the spice trade, the sultan sought to force Venetian merchants to buy more pepper at an even higher price from his warehouses.

To attempt both to agree a common response to the external threats and to sort out the bilateral squalls, Venice despatched a mission in 1502 led by Benedetto Sanudo to Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri in Cairo. Sanudo had two principal aims. First to persuade the sultan that it was in the mutual interest of the two powers for Egypt to lower tariffs on spices and other goods imported from India, to improve Venetian competitiveness against Portugal. Second, to underline the seriousness of the Portuguese threat, and hint, in a way that did not however provoke charges of Portuguese conspiracy with

a Muslim power against a fellow Catholic one,[17] that he should take direct action against the Portuguese.

Sanudo only reached Cairo in spring 1503 after a challenging journey. His gifts to the sultan including textiles, furs and, yes, cheese, and he was given gifts for the doge in return, including porcelain, incense, sugar and civet musk.[18] The sultan did despatch a fleet against the Portuguese, but this did not have the desired effect, and ended with Mamluk defeat in 1509 in a naval battle at Diu. Portuguese maritime control was firmly established.[19]

Another Venetian mission, headed by Domenico Trevisan, thus arrived in Cairo in 1512 against a worsening backdrop. Trevisan was tasked with sorting out ongoing disputes over the pepper price, resolving an issue of access to the Holy Land and securing the release of Pietro Zen, Venice's consul in Damascus.[20] The latter had been detained in Cairo around suspicions related to contacts with the Safavids, Venice had cause to be pleased with the outcome of the visit, securing what would prove to be their final commercial treaty with the Mamluks. Zen was not only released, but even received a parting robe of honour from the sultan.[21] This would all prove of little lasting benefit: the Mamluk sultanate had only five years left, before being swept aside by the Ottomans in 1517.

Paralleling the Venetian practice in respect of visiting envoys, the sultan was keen to impress, providing the Venetian party with fine lodgings in a palace that had belonged to a wife of the former sultan. On their arrival in the city, he sent them a gift of provisions including 20 geese, 44 sugar-loaves and five jugs of Indian honey.[22] Trevisan's gifts for the sultan included 150 gowns, some velvet, some satin, others threaded with gold. He also presented a huge quantity of furs, including 4,500 squirrel furs, as well as sables and ermine, and, of particular interest to our study, 50 cheese blocks.[23]



Present in the gift packages to the sultan from both Sanudo and Trevisan, cheese was clearly an important component of Venetian gifting to Mamluk sultans in the early sixteenth century. What were these distinguished cheeses? US historian Jesse Hysell proposes the cheese presented by Sanudo as *piacentinu,* a Sicilian cheese named for its pleasing taste.[24] With its golden hue created by the addition of expensive saffron, this cheese does appear to offer the quality of wonderment looked for in a prestigious diplomatic gift. It is also tempting to identify the peppercorns added to *piacentinu* cheese as a symbol of the pepper trade that underlined the close relationship between Venice and Egypt. Perhaps the cheese in question was however not *piacentinu* but *piacentino,* cheese from the Italian region of Piacenza. Historian Kenneth Meyer Setton identifies the gift made nine years later by Trevisan as 'cheeses from Piacenza'[25] and, as we have seen, these were among the cheeses given in 1582

to the visiting Muscovite embassy. Piacentine cheese was also gifted by Venice to the Ottoman court.[26]

The cheese in question might have been a hard, crumbly, parmesan-like product, something like the Grana Padano produced in Piacenza province today. Parmesan-type cheeses were popular diplomatic gifts from various Italian courts. In gratitude for the support of the young King Henry VIII of England for his 'Holy League', Pope Julius II not only conferred on him a Golden Rose, the prestigious papal award to favoured sovereigns, but also gave him a hundred parmesan cheeses.[27] Parmesan was so highly prized in England that when, in 1666, the Great Fire of London threatened the property of diarist Samuel Pepys, his parmesan cheese was one of the items placed in a pit in a neighbouring garden for its protection.[28]

## Diplomatic Gifts of Food and Drink to Twenty-First Century US Presidents

Diplomatic gifts were viewed with concern by the founding fathers of the United States of America, built on the ideals of the Enlightenment. They seemed to represent the corrupting influence of the Old World and its absolute monarchies, a threat to the very survival of the new state.[29] In drawing up the US Constitution they built on Article VI of its forerunner, the Articles of Confederation, devising an Emoluments Clause providing that 'no Person holding any Office of Profit or Trust under them, shall, without the Consent of the Congress, accept of any present, Emolument, Office or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State.' These rules attempted to guard against corruption through an over-arching framework that, in embracing all gifts, did not require corrupt intent.[30]



Such concerns were not unknown in the Old World, and indeed the Venetian Republic of the sixteenth century had rules in place preventing the acceptance by individuals of valuable diplomatic gifts from foreign powers. The gift to the doge of a diamond ring from the future Henri III at the end of his stay in 1574 occasioned much debate in the Venetian senate about what to do with it. The eventual decision was to mount it in a specially made gold lily, commemorating Henri's goodwill towards the republic, and place it in the treasury of St Mark's.[31] Provisions as sweeping as those adopted by the United States were however uncommon. They had the effect of changing diplomatic gifts from personal to regulated transactions.[32]

Congress is not of course required to deliberate on every foreign gift a US official would like to keep. Rather, the Foreign Gifts and Decorations Act of 1966, and subsequent amendments, give effect to the Emoluments Clause. This legislation allows officials to accept and keep gifts worth less than a statutorily defined 'minimal value' - $375 in 2016.[33] Costlier gifts may be accepted if refusal would cause offence or embarrassment, or otherwise be harmful to US foreign relations, but such gifts

cannot be retained personally by the recipient. They are accepted on behalf of the USA, and passed to the National Archives and Records Administration,[34] unless the recipient pays the US government the appraisal value of the gift in order to keep it. They rarely do. Gifts to US presidents from foreign leaders will generally be transferred to the presidential library museum collection, itself under the purview of the National Archives and Records Administration, after they have left office.[35] Gifts of food, drink and other perishable items such as perfumes are 'handled pursuant to US Secret Service policy', which appears to mean that they are simply disposed of.[36]

The rules around the acceptance of gifts by US officials give rise to the annual publication in the United States Federal Register by the Office of the Chief of Protocol of the US State Department of a list of the reported gifts from foreign government sources received by US federal employees. This serves as a useful source of information on the diplomatic gifts received by US presidents. This paper surveys the foreign gifts received by US presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, covering the sixteen years from 2001 to 2016, exploring the place of food and drink items in these gifts.

There are some limitations in the information set out in the annual list. It says nothing about the gifts given by the US president during the gift exchanges. Attempts to draw conclusions from the overall figures are challenged by the changing methodology used to compile the list. For example, presentations involving more than one gift are usually grouped as one entry, but in the Bush years of 2007 and 2008 are more often separated out. Most importantly, the list covers only gifts valued above the statutorily defined 'minimal value'. This means that food and drink items on the list generally fall into one of three categories. Items gifted as part of larger presentations incorporating other gifts. Food or drink gifted in particularly large quantities, such as the 300lb of lamb gifted to President Bush in 2003 by Argentinean President Néstor Kirchner.[37] Or items presented in an expensive container, such as the wooden box incorporating an American flag and eagle design made of precious and semiprecious stones in which President Mahinda Rajapaska of Sri Lanka gifted six pouches of coffee to President Obama in 2011.[38]



Over the sixteen-year period, 1099 gift packages received by the president, including gifts made jointly to the president and first lady, are listed in the returns. Eighty-seven include one or more items of food and drink, around eight per cent of the total. Food and drink are not then among the most common components of expensive gift packages to the president. Gifts involving food or drink come from 41 countries, with eight countries offering three or more food or drink-related gifts over the sixteen-year period: France (9), Algeria (8), Brunei (8), Tunisia (4), the United Kingdom (4), Italy (4), Morocco (3) and Poland (3). Wine is the most frequently gifted

food and drink item (mentioned in 31 gift packages), followed by spirits/liqueurs (15), chocolates (15), dates (11), biscuits (8) and fruit (7). Items mentioned just once include banana chips, beer, panettone, popcorn, peanut butter, and the sixteenth-century Venetian favourite, cheese.

What can be discerned from the State Department lists about the gift strategies underpinning the choice of food and drink items? Most obviously, items chosen as diplomatic gifts are generally products associated with pleasure and luxury, particularly wine, spirits and sweet food products, rather than sustenance. No gifts of vegetables are recorded.

The most consistent gift strategy in evidence is that of showcasing food and drink products for which the gifting country is particularly known. Haut-Médoc wine from France; ice wine from Canada; Turkish coffee; tequila from Mexico. In some cases, the gifts highlight the culture of the gifting country through its food and drink, as with a gift of maté to President Bush in 2006 from Tabaré Vázquez, President of Uruguay, gifted together with the traditional silver drinking straw and container.[39] Gifts may also highlight products for which a country would like to be better known internationally, supporting the export ambitions of local food and drink producers by associating the product, whether Angolan coffee or Croatian wine, with the president of the United States.



Gift packages offered to visiting heads of state and government attending international summit meetings often use food and drink items characteristic of the summit venue to convey a sense of 'place' that can otherwise prove elusive in tight-packed programmes of intensive negotiations in frequently windowless conference rooms. Gifts to President Obama from British Prime Minister David Cameron at the 2013 G8 summit held at the Lough Erne Resort in Northern Ireland included Co Couture chocolates, the work of a luxury Belfast producer, and a bottle of whiskey, alongside other gifts providing geographical markers, including books about Northern Ireland and a pair of porcelain cups decorated with shamrocks.[40]

Not all food and drink gifts to US presidents have a specific association with the gifting country. A different gifting strategy is in evidence in respect of the Lady McDuffies lemon cheesecake, the work of a bakery in Clarence, New York, gifted in December 2003 to President Bush by the Sultan of Brunei. This was part of a package full of pleasant holiday-season gifts, from a mahogany jewellery box to a CD entitled 'An Old English Christmas', as well as two dozen McDuffies shortbread cookies in a glass jar.[41] Such gifts of generic nice presents can convey an impression of a friendly, familiar relationship between the two leaders.[42]

The presence of dates as the fourth most frequently gifted category of food and drink items to US presidents owes much to the holiness accorded to the date within

Islam, to the tradition of breaking Ramadan fasts with dates, and specifically that to distribute dates at Ramadan among friends and family. Regular gifts of dates to US presidents account for the prominent place of both Algeria and Tunisia in the breakdown of food and drink-related gifts by country. The importance placed on munificent gift-giving in Islamic societies may also lie at the root of the lavishness of some individual gifts. In 2013, King Mohammed VI of Morocco gifted President Obama a basket of Godiva chocolates valued at $2,484, suggestive of a considerable quantity of chocolate.[43]

## Conclusion

Food and drink then were used as diplomatic gifts both in sixteenth-century Venice and as gifts to modern-day US presidents. There is however an important difference between these two contexts. In sixteenth-century Venice, the food and drink was intended to be consumed, whether as the *refrescamenti* provided to visiting delegations or as the large quantities of luxury cheeses presented to foreign courts. They were gifts of real food, notwithstanding the wariness of some rulers to partake, given fears of poisoning. It seems for example that Henri III refrained from eating at the lavish banquets held in his honour.[44]

In the regulated environment surrounding gifts to twenty-first century US presidents, the recipient is destined never actually to consume the gifted item, which is instead handled 'pursuant to US Secret Service policy'. Rather than a gift intended to be enjoyed as a luxury food or drink product, its function is that of a diplomatic signal. It can serve to highlight the prized food and drink products of the gifting country and potentially to promote exports, as well as to take advantage of the specific qualities of food and drink as gifts: their associations with friendship and conviviality serving as a metaphor for the desired warmth of the relationship between the two leaders. A real gift in the sixteenth century has become an imagined one in the twenty-first.



Many countries around the world have, like the USA, adopted limits on the value of diplomatic gifts that may be accepted and retained by government officials. In this context, the relatively low cost of food and drink items means that small gifts of consumable products have become an attractive option as gifts that may be offered in the reasonable expectation that the recipient will be allowed to retain and enjoy them. These are then gifts of real food and drink, designed to be consumed, but much smaller in scale than their sixteenth-century Venetian equivalents. For the giver, they both underline a desire to continue a relationship and serve as a calling card for their country's luxury food and drink products, part of a wider strategy of gastrodiplomacy.

Diplomatic gifts of food in the twenty-first century are thus more symbolic gifts than were those made in sixteenth-century Venice. In the case of gifts to US presidents, the taste of the food is left to the imagination.

## Notes

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