Reconsidering the Culinary Imagination

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ABSTRACT: Recent critiques of French gastronomy and the nation’s foodway suggest that we must reconsider the consequences of the culinary imagination that has flourished and formed the way in which French people eat and think about food over the past three decades. These critiques suggest that the nostalgic thinking about food and the rural and a consequent heritagization push that arose from fears of globalization have created an unsustainable and inequitable gastronomic system.

Gastronomic narratives of the extreme contemporary provide the space for elucidating consistent and brutal critiques of the nation’s heritagization of food by revealing wilfully maintained blind spots and patterns of co-optation of rural values. We can read Paul-Henry Bizon’s 2017 novel La Louve as an exemplary case. La Louve brings together urban gastronomy and rural agriculture to reveal the consequences of engaging some imaginaries while neglecting others. Through Camille, a small farmer practicing agroecology, and his wife Victoire, La Louve proposes a new way of literally and figuratively sustaining the nation, one that will rely on utopian thinking. I engage Erik Olin Wright’s conception of ‘real utopias’ to frame the imaginative potential of Camille and Victoire’s vision for the future of the French gastronomic system.

In contemporary France, there is a tension between the nation’s culinary imagination and reality. The beginning of the twenty-first century marked a period of wide-spread, nostalgia-induced gastronomic heritagization, capitalizing on the culinary imaginaries of consumers and politicians eager to fortify individual and national identities through ties to the local, the rural, and the land. Today, though, the consequences of engaging these imaginaries are coming to the fore. The gastronomic reality in which the French now live suggests that recent culinary imaginings, despite their creative and emancipatory potential, have resulted in an unsustainable and deleterious gastronomic system. Gastronomic narratives of the past five years have been integral in the shift from imaginative to realistic thinking. Breaking from their own highly nostalgic bent at the beginning of the twenty-first century and embracing pseudo-documentary forms, gastronomic narratives reveal brutal truths and provide necessary critiques of French gastronomic consumption and production. Importantly, though, many of these narratives avoid fatalism, imagining alternative modes of production and consumption, thus calling for a reconsideration of the culinary imaginaries upon which we act. An exemplary narrative in this vein is Paul-
Henry Bizon’s 2017 novel *La Louve*. *La Louve* presents a sweeping and unforgiving critique of the French nation’s culinary stance, particularly as it takes shape in Paris, while also proposing a promising alternative gastronomic system in the shape of what sociologist Erik Olin Wright defines a ‘real utopia’.

The imagination has occupied a fundamental role in shaping foodscapes over the past three decades. Facing a rapidly changing society, the loss of community structures, and the perceived dilution of culture brought on by globalization, a nostalgic gastronomic reflex marked the turn of the twenty-first century. To orient themselves in the present and establish a trajectory for the future, people turned to food, a preeminent aspect of individual and national identity that is also readily available and easily manipulable. The food of import was local and terroir-linked, as these nostalgia-laced products offered up the vicarious experience of the ‘authenticity’ of rural life as well as a connection to the land, to roots and to perceptibly fleeting values and ways of life. In a compounding of the imagination, people and nations were engaging the symbolic values of foods and culinary practices to gain access to an imagined past. This thread of culinary imagination extended across the globe, but was particularly influential in France, a country that had a particularly negative response to globalization. Throughout Europe, a series of food safety scares arose at the same time, contributing to French wariness of the global market and industrial food production. Foods with a connection to terroir, rural heritage, and small-scale agriculture were not only a direct line to the national rural heritage but also a safe and knowable alternative to the mysteries of the industrial food system. What has developed is a veritable obsession with the rural and the local, an obsession which allows city-dwellers to appropriate and consume rural values and identities, perpetuating the notion that the countryside exists to the city in myriad ways.

The nostalgic embrace of the local, the rural, and the traditional in terms of gastronomy extended to the nation. Spanning across the political spectrum, the French government, at the local, regional, and national levels, has embarked on a sustained and far-reaching heritagization effort to protect French culture and values with a particular eye to the nation’s gastronomy. While the list of heritagization efforts is too extensive to discuss here, we can highlight several examples. Internationally, France has engaged in a vast gastrodiplomacy campaign, availing itself of UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage List to protect and promote the gastronomic meal of the French in 2010 and has just recently, in 2021, proposed a nomination file to put the baguette on this list. At the local and regional level, protection and promotion came about through local festivals and celebrations dedicated to specific foods and culinary practices. In conceiving of these events, imagination looms large. Many of the origin stories of local products are swathed in myth-making and nostalgic recollection.

The figure at the heart of these events was the *paysan*. Though translated as ‘peasant’, *paysan* refers to the rural inhabitant who has maintained a deep connection to the land and
to French agricultural and rural heritage. The *paysan* is not exclusively a farmer, though many are. Traditionally, the *paysan* is considered a guardian of traditional values and an emblem of French civilization. He represents ‘the soul of the nation, evoking the deep-rooted cultural traditions, attachment to the national territory, and an equilibrium that guarantees the health of society’. Throughout history, the national body has relied on the *paysan* to sustain the nation literally and figuratively and, depending on the moment, reinvigorate or sustain the national economy. As such, given the need to protect French identity and gastronomic values, this turn to and elevation of the paysan is unsurprising.

French gastronomic narratives – literary and cinematic works in which gastronomy serves as a central structuring device – captured this nostalgic turn in real time, offering it up as a national engagement in which all could take part. Indeed, gastronomic narratives provide valuable windows into contemporary foodways, expressing values, critiquing practices and attitudes, and foreshadowing食品scapes to come. Films such *Le Fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain* (*Amélie*, 2001) demonstrated the ways in which France and the French would harness culinary nostalgia as a tool for self-fashioning in a seemingly unstable world. *Amélie*’s world was, as the title indicates, fabulous and fantastical. Though, it was also indicative of the moment and exemplary of a wider trend in gastronomic narratives and the national gastronomic discourse. In the film, Amélie spends her days dreaming up good deeds, and delighting in the small pleasures of food such as cracking the burnt sugar crust of a *crème brûlée* and sinking her fingers into sacks of grain as she visits her local food vendor. She is an inhabitant of highly-charged culinary spaces, working in a café seemingly stuck in the 1960s, whizzing through a busy market street, and often in her kitchen or at the table. The foods and culinary spaces of *Amélie* and similar narratives offer up a figurative *retour aux sources*, a return to the land, to the past, and to the perceived values of a time gone by, serving as viable touchstones in the present with the aim of fashioning a better, more stable future.

Over the course of the past five years, however, there has been a marked shift away from the nostalgic, the imaginary, and the fantastical. In gastronomic narratives in the extreme contemporary, a pseudo-documentary form is taking its place. This shift is part of a larger trend in contemporary French literature and film towards the real that has been occurring since the beginning of the twenty-first century but is only recently crossing into gastronomic narratives. There is a general belief that the challenges of our time merit a realistic perspective and a reckoning. In the gastronomic context, authors and filmmakers carefully intertwine truth and fiction to expose and critique the brutal realities of what it means to produce, sell, and consume food in contemporary France. Indeed, the proliferation of these narratives is marked, with over a dozen noteworthy examples and new narratives entering the mainstream each year, some of which I highlight below.
A dominant preoccupation of these narratives is the plight of the modern-day small farmer and the family-owned vineyard. Films such as *Ce qui nous lie* (*Back to Burgundy*, 2017), *Petit paysan* (*Bloody Milk*, 2017), and *Roxane* (2018) shed light on the challenges of owning and running a family-owned farm in the face of European regulation, the threat of multinational corporations, and punitive French tax laws. In this vein, two narratives stand out, each bringing to light the elevated rate of suicide among farmers – Michel Houellebecq’s 2019 novel *Sérotonine* (*Serotonin*) and Édouard Bergeon’s cinematic hit *Au nom de la terre* (*In the Name of the Land*) from the same year. *Sérotonine* tells of the demise of a farmer, Aymeric, through the eyes of his friend and a former employee of the Ministry of Agriculture who is also the novel’s narrator. Enumerating facts and figures that represent the realities of dairy farming in France, the narrator provides the context through which readers understand Aymeric’s desperation and eventual suicide. The narrator’s own willingness to buy groceries at Carrefour, one of the world’s largest grocery distributors, while witnessing the downfall of his longtime friend, provides a reflective and critical mirror through which the reader might view herself. *Au nom de la terre*, depicts a similar picture, drawing the viewer in to rural life through an intimate portrait of a farmer struggling to maintain the family farm, eventually succumbing to a multitude of pressures by taking his own life. This film is semi-autobiographical. The film’s director grew up on a farm and his father similarly took his own life. The aim of these narratives is to reveal that, even while consuming terroir-linked products, attending agricultural fairs and food festivals, and exalting the local, we are painfully unaware of the realities facing those who form the backbone of the food system. They engage readers and viewers by immersing them in the world of the farmer so that he becomes distinct and knowable rather than a distant, minimalized subject in a blurb on the evening news.

These new narratives break the nostalgic gaze, revealing the devastating, albeit sometimes unintentional, consequences of the culinary imaginaries that have flourished in and shaped the twenty-first century. They expose the gaping chasm between the popular, urban imagination of rural life and its reality, namely the hardship that farmers face. Urban consumers willingly ignore signs of industrial, productivist agriculture such as giant combine harvesters, the use of fertilizers and pesticides, and sprawling warehouse-style barns. It is not only consumers who are to blame, however. Despite numerous opportunities to do so, the French government has repeatedly neglected to address the paradox in which farmers live – they make profound sacrifices to sustain the nation while unable to sustain their own families. This lack of understanding and the paradox of the small farmer are indicative of what historian Venus Bivar describes as a ‘collective and voluntary case of misrecognition’. Gastronomic nostalgia and the heritagization of the rural have led to the proliferation of ‘fair-weather ruralists’, or urban-bound citizens who call upon farmers to protect the landscape and stand as bearers of national values only to
either occasionally descend upon the countryside to consume them or otherwise leave them at the mercy of government policy and the industrial food complex.¹⁷

These paradoxes and moral shortcomings come under the microscope in Paul-Henry Bizon’s 2017 novel La Louve. An exemplary narrative of its kind, the novel lays out a sweeping assessment of contemporary French food culture, bringing together agriculture and the contemporary urban food scene in a clash of gastronomic values and vision in the interwoven tales of two men: Camille Vollot, an overly idealistic small farmer with dreams of transforming French agriculture and society, and Raoul Sarkis, a smooth-talking charlatan looking to profit off the gastronomic frenzy that has taken over the French capital. Intertwining fiction with journalistic exposé, the novel is a roman à clef referencing the Jeune Rue affair, in which Cédric Naudon, a self-described cultural entrepreneur, swindled banks, artists, farmers, chefs, politicians, and, in essence, the entire French nation, all in the name of protecting French cultural heritage.¹⁸ Through Camille and Raoul, La Louve exposes the harsh truths that compose the imagined world we (believe to) consume, revealing the whole of French gastronomy to be nothing but artifice – ‘a good joke’, ‘a theatre’, ‘a scene’.¹⁹

Through Raoul Sarkis, La Louve demonstrates how gastronomy’s centrality to the national project renders it easily exploitable. Profiting off the heritagization push described above, investors, politicians, and banks have been eager to throw their weight behind any project aimed at protecting and promoting this national treasure. In the novel, Sarkis claims to be creating a large cultural hub in the centre of Paris, the Pavillon des Horizons, where people will engage with the hottest figures in the arts and food. At the centre of the project, he claims, will be French terroir. Ingredients for restaurants will be sourced from small-scale farmers practicing ecologically friendly agriculture, because as Sarkis notes, this is the foundation of the whole of French gastronomic exceptionalism; without its magnificent agriculture, French gastronomy would be ‘nothing’.²⁰ Bringing together farmers from around the nation in the heart of Paris, the Pavillon will impact all of France, Sarkis explains.²¹ Speaking as if a saviour, he insists he is creating a ‘better world’.²² Sarkis smooth talk and the thrust of the contemporary heritagization project all but certify his success. Politicians ‘could only support him. Public opinion would salute him for his initiative in favour of the land’.²³

In reality, though, Sarkis is simply co-opting the rural and the local to his own financial ends. His words are just ‘ecological smooth-talk’.²⁴ Sarkis is condescending towards engaged farmers like Camille who truly work for the betterment of the natural world.²⁵ He is a ‘compulsive liar’ and an ‘opportunist’.²⁶ He usurps the discourse of land and heritage and steals the fruits of Camille’s labour ‘to create a brand, a little toy for Parisians and rich tourists’.²⁷ Sarkis is ‘totally indifferent to what is on his plate’ or any other, only caring about potential profits to be had.²⁸ He has no intention of following through on his pretend
plans. Once he has enough money in his pockets from banks, investors, and thieving, and just before the walls come crashing down around him, he will cut and run, leaving only financial and cultural ruins in his wake.

The urban co-optation of the rural has become increasingly common with the rise of heritagization and implicates everyone, from everyday consumers to power-hungry politicians. Geographer Claire Delfosse describes the urban and political co-optation and appropriation of rural values, norms, and products as ‘post-modern heritagization’. The urban profits off the rural while negating the latter’s identity rather than reaffirm it. So eager to believe in something greater than oneself and support a national cause, people are more likely, the narrator in La Louve claims, to fall victim to empty promises and deceptive projects like the one Sarkis claims to be leading. Investors and politicians waste money and power while consumers are duped into a false knowledge about what they are eating.

Sarkis is keen to get into the gastronomic scene because it is so easily exploitable. While he is at a dinner with the movers and shakers of the Parisian food scene, another guest explains that Parisians go to restaurants ‘believing that the people who run them are better than their predecessors, that they work towards the happiness of clients, for their well-being and the well-being of all humanity, that they are engaged in a fight for the environment, for farmers, and all that’. A tone of mockery accompanies this exposé and the dismissive finish of the remark make the reality all the more biting. In an interview, Bizon identifies this lack of knowledge as central to the novel, saying he aimed to depict how ‘city-dwellers, who are distanced from the soil’ forget that agriculture is at the heart of everything they eat. Within the novel, the narrator laments urban consumers who use local products as a way of gaining cultural capital and feeding their fanciful and abstract notions about the countryside, but fail to form any real connection to paysans or the land. The entire Parisian gastronomic system, the novel suggests, has devolved into lip service to an ideal that does not exist. In this way, La Louve rejects the culinary imagination that birthed and continues to nourish this very system.

While this increasingly derisive take on French gastronomy and the rural turn compounds as the novel progresses, bordering on an altogether fatalistic view, La Louve turns back towards the potential of the culinary imaginary at its close in a rethinking of the gastronomic system. After all, imagination is inescapable. It is an integral part of ourselves. It shapes who we are and our understanding of the world. Imagination is necessary for change; how else would we create something new?

A new vision of French foodways comes through Camille Vollot, his farm where he practices agroecology and permaculture, and his cooperative of like-minded farmers. After living for several years in the city of Nantes, Camille and his wife return to the fictional village of Montfort-sur-Sèvre in the Vendée region and purchase his uncle’s farm. In just a few years, Camille shows an immense success with permaculture and creates ‘a model
ecosystem’. The farm is ‘a stupefying laboratory whose vegetable production [is] objectively several times higher than the national average’ despite not using agricultural machinery, fertilizers, or pesticides. Not only is Camille’s farm ‘a nourishing landscape’ of ‘astounding beauty’, it is also a testament to agricultural diversity. One might lose themselves in the ‘plant-covered labyrinth where hundreds of varietals and species blossomed in spirals of a mandala-like garden, around ponds, under the foliage of the forest and orchards’.

Because of his success, Camille believes that this alternative to industrial agriculture is the way forward for France. His greater mission is to defend the rural people by freeing them from the overly reductive figure of the “small producer” and to propose a production both certified and of sufficient scale to supply grocery chains and even school cafeterias and retirement homes.

His cooperative serves up a healthier and more sustainable alternative to what is in the supermarket – ‘the containers of meat wrapped in plastic, the same petrified cheeses and transformed products of all kinds, the same brands of cans and jars and “thingamajigs” to drink, but nothing, really, that seems actually good or edible’. Quite the opposite, the products from Camille’s farm ‘radiate with a prodigious optimism’, ‘shine with power and joy’, and have unique tastes and textures that linger on the palate and transport the eater.

Camille’s food is superior. It communicates the land in which it was grown and is imbued with life-affirming values.

For Camille, agroecology provides not only a better way to eat, but also a better way to live. Camille and his mentor Anne-Marie believe that there is a fundamental problem in contemporary French society – that it has lost the ties that bind it together – that a true connection to the land may resolve. This loss is manifest in how the nation nourishes itself. In Anne-Marie’s mind ‘our postmodern society, whose model of row crop farming contradicts nature’s cyclical model that does not necessitate the use of fossil fuels or generate waste, neglect[s] a fundamental notion – the necessity of multiple and reciprocal connections between living things’.

Undeniably, this passage speaks to the dangers of maintaining the agricultural status quo. It comes in a section of the novel subtitled ‘Accusation’ and in the middle of a long documentary-like exposé on modern industrial agriculture and the harm it inflicts on people and the land. However, removing the subordinate clause, we also understand that postmodern society’s blind spot has resulted in the dissolution of multiple and reciprocal relationships between all living things. The gastronomic ecosystem that France has constructed for itself over the course of the past sixty years is on the verge of collapse. Values traditionally associated with French gastronomy including conviviality and agricultural diversity have come to ring hollow in the search for the gastronomic new and both economic and cultural capital. Thus Anne-Marie’s, and later Camille’s, principal concern is French society’s negligence – the forgotten truth that people must cultivate deeply rooted bonds with each other and with the natural world to flourish. It is through the land, figuratively and literally, that Camille believes people can re-establish these links.
and break down the long-standing, though artificial, divide between nature and culture while simultaneously eating well.⁴⁰

Camille’s dream is to create ‘rhizome’, of which the cooperative will provide the ‘central nervous system, linking the soil and its inhabitants, capable of revitalizing all of society’.⁴¹ Indeed, Bizon identifies Camille’s vision as his desired consequence of the novel. Readers should understand they are part of a vast ecosystem in which all people and things interact and are dependent upon one another.⁴² The image of the rhizome is particularly important in its emancipatory and creative potential. It is philosophical and natural form that rejects the verticality of ‘rooted’ thinking while embracing the expansion of connections and possibilities.⁴³ It is democratic and subversive. Through the rhizomatic cooperative, Camille hopes to create the exact opposite of the ‘technocratic utopia’ that has driven the French food market since the 1960s. He wants to craft ‘the first viable model for virtuous production and for direct sales on a scale much larger than that practiced by the young, locally politically engaged farmers and hippie communities’.⁴⁴ In this model, consumers are in direct contact with producers, cultivating real and extensive bonds while also creating economic opportunity for farmers working with alternative forms of agriculture that privilege quality and health for the land and the consumer. It is his fervent belief in the possibility of achieving this new utopia, though, that leads Camille to blindly believe that Sarkis also shares this vision. Camille falls victim to his own imagination.

At the close of the novel, Camille’s wife Victoire, an ardent realist and the only person to see Raoul for what he is, stands alone in the courtyard of what would have been the Pavillon des Horizons. Looking at the magnificent building around her, she is struck by its beauty. She sees the potential of creating a gastronomic hub in the centre of Paris, though one that is built by and through her family’s agricultural cooperative, not through profiteering intermediaries. If she and Camille can harness their resources and personally take control of the building, then the cooperative could have a promising future and Camille’s rhizomatic ecosystem may flourish.

Ultimately, the novel proposes what sociologist Erik Olin Wright terms ‘real utopias’.⁴⁵ Wright envisions real utopias as ‘viable, emancipatory alternatives to dominant institutions and social structures’.⁴⁶ These alternatives balance the fantasies we imagine in utopia with the practical realities and constraints of the world in which we live. Wright’s concept of real utopias works on the assumptions that they are generated from the ground-up rather than from top-down approaches and that movement toward greater equality and more democratic societies ‘expand the possibilities of human flourishing’.⁴⁷ Examples of real utopias include the goal of instituting a universal basic income, urban participatory budgeting, and worker-owned cooperatives.⁴⁸ This final example is particularly interesting in the context of La Louve. Camille’s agroecology cooperative is the backbone for the movement he wants to propagate. Worker-owned cooperatives provide alternatives to contemporary capitalist
structures, giving power and agency to workers. These benefits of cooperatives are essential to reforming contemporary foodways, not only in France, but globally. Furthermore, while Victoire is a realist, and her vision at the end of the novel may not completely overlap with that of her husband, her creative thinking provides an important first step on the journey to creating the more viable gastronomic and human ecosystem that her husband imagines. These types of way posts are essential to the real utopia because they provide checkpoints, so that even if the utopic end is unreachable, we ‘nevertheless have accessible waystations that help us move in the right direction’. The quest for real utopias, thus, may prove integral to creating real, radical and rhizomatic alternatives to the status quo.

In a foreward to Food Utopias (2015), Frederick Kirschenmann, President of Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture and an international leader for sustainable agriculture, proclaimed that the time had come for a ‘creative moment’ for engaging new imaginings for our global food system. The French gastronomic system realistically portrayed in La louve, is a system imagined from the top-down. Farmers have long played to the imagination of others rather than cultivate their own visions for the future. The financial constraints and the bureaucratic obstacles they face do not afford them the luxury of realizing their own imaginaries. This system is morally, economically, politically, environmentally, and nutritionally unhealthy. It is also at a breaking point. Gastronomic narratives that question, criticize and elucidate this system are essential in this moment. Unlike their immediate forebearers, gastronomic narratives of the extreme contemporary elevate new ideas and propose change. We would, certainly, be wise to consider the imagined cultural and systemic changes for which they call. As Christy Wampole reminds us, ‘the most staggering cultural changes often must happen first in literature, music, and art, which provide the space where new ideas may be tried out without the requirement of apodictic certainty’. In these spaces, imaginative, utopian thinking thrives. In the quest to develop an alternative to the gastronomic (and unsustainable) status quo, the capacity to imagine and create real utopias proves a necessary faculty, not a fanciful endeavour. If we are to create change and follow the imagination, then, the questions become: Who gets to imagine? Which imaginative visions do we pursue? Camille and Victoire answer Kirschenmann’s call. La Louve causes us to reassess the culinary imagination as it has been and as it could be. The novel proposes new imaginations that will fundamentally alter the foodscape while providing direct and meaningful access to the purported values of the nation. The seeds of the gastronomic imaginary must move from the ground up. Only then can imagination lead the development of a real gastronomic utopia.

Notes
7. Amy L. Tigner and Allison Carruth argue that literary criticism provides a valuable contribution to food studies as writers use various literary devices through food to investigate and critique foodways. Amy L. Tigner and Allison Carruth, Literature and Food Studies (London: Routledge, 2018).
11. Ce qui nous lie, dir. by Cédric Klapisch (Studio Canal, 2017); Petit paysan, dir. by Hubert Charuel (Pyramide Distribution, 2017); Roxane, dir. by Mélanie Auffret (Mars Films, 2018).
28. Bizon, p. 89.

Draft Version: Not for Distribution or Citation
31. Bizon, p. 103, original emphasis.
33. Bizon, p. 188.
35. Bizon, pp. 66-67
37. Bizon, p. 113.
38. Bizon, p. 188.
40. Christy Wampole argues that the attempt to break down the divide between nature and culture is a particular concern of the twenty-first century and gives several food-linked examples in her analysis. Christy Wampole, Rootedness: The Ramifications of a Metaphor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 242-49.
42. Un livre, un jour.
43. Wampole, Rootedness, ch. 7.
44. Bizon, p. 175.
47. Wright, ‘Real Utopias’ p. 38. See also Wright, Envisioning, ch. 1.
48. Wright, Envisioning.
49. Wright, ‘Real Utopias’, p. 37.
51. Wampole, Rootedness, p.236.