Everyone deserves quiche: French school lunch programmes and national culture in a globalized world

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Abstract

Globalization poses many challenges for national cultural unity, especially in Europe. Some doubt whether national cultures will be able to survive, but there are many counter-trends pushing to maintain national cultural unity. I analyse the dual trends of global diversity and maintaining unity through an everyday manifestation of French culture: elementary school lunches. French school lunch programmes are part of the nation-building process because they are designed to teach students how to eat, which is especially important in France where the art of gastronomy is a key source of identity and pride. I analyse cultural influences on over 11,000 school lunch menu items from eight municipalities across two French regions. I also conduct in-depth face-to-face interviews with the people who design and approve school lunch menus. My inquiry is guided by three key questions. First, to what extent are foreign influences included? Second, does openness to foreign influences vary across different parts of France? Finally, how are foreign cultures represented? My results suggest that foreign cultures are deployed to nationalize difference. The limited foreign influences that appear in school lunches are strategically chosen to appeal to and to educate students, but in a way that reinforces the centrality of traditional French cultural norms. This article contributes to our understanding of the tension between national culture and a globalizing world.

Keywords: globalization; national identity; France; school lunch; gastronomy; cultural reproduction

Introduction

National cultures are an ongoing process of unifying people around common language, symbols and cultural practices (Weber 1976). The process is
never simple, but the recent acceleration of global interconnectedness may be especially challenging for national cultural unity, especially in Europe. Mass migration from around the world has inexorably altered the demographic and cultural complexion of European societies (Alba and Foner 2015). In addition, Europeans increasingly live their lives across national borders, creating transnational trajectories that combine multiple cultural influences (Mau, Mewes and Zimmerman 2008; Recchi 2015). Moreover, consumer goods and popular culture circulate around the world at unprecedented speeds (Miller 2008). It is unclear whether national cultural unity will be able to survive in a transnational, multicultural and globalized world (Beck and Grande 2007).

Yet, despite the rapid acceleration of globalization, there are strong counter-trends pushing to maintain national cultural unity. Governments across Europe have developed new civic integration tests that require cultural assimilation before immigrants can become citizens (or before obtaining visas to arrive in the country) (Goodman 2014). In addition, mass publics across Europe reinforce social norms that punish immigrants who openly display foreign cultures (Favell 2008). Populist ethno-nationalist political movements have been especially vocal in their call for national cultural unity, and have enjoyed rising levels of success across Europe in recent years (Berezin 2009; Mudde 2017). European national communities may be challenged by globalization, but there is still a strong push for cultural unity.

In this article I analyse the dual trends of global diversity and maintaining unity through an everyday manifestation of French culture: elementary school lunches. Since the nineteenth century, French schools have been central to the nation-building process by spreading the French language and teaching a common history and geography (Weber 1976). French school lunch programmes are also part of that nation-building process because they are designed to teach students how to eat (Stengel 2012). French school lunch programmes educate students about nutrition, gastronomic pleasure and French culinary traditions, which goes well beyond the bare minimum of supplying enough calories for classroom learning. These lessons are especially important in France where the art of gastronomy is a key source of identity and pride (DeSoucey 2010; Ferguson 2004), and a crucial tool for drawing cultural boundaries (Rao, Monin and Durand 2005). Analysing the content of French school lunches provides insight into how French culture is being presented to the next generation of citizens.

To examine how French culture negotiates the competing demands of globalized diversity and maintaining unity, I pursue three lines of inquiry. First, to what extent are foreign influences included in school lunches? Second, does openness to foreign influences in school lunches vary across France? Finally, how are foreign cultures represented when included in school lunches?

My results indicate that foreign influences are present but limited in French school lunch programmes. These findings are remarkably consistent across
eight municipalities in two different regions. Moreover, my results suggest that foreign cultures are deployed to nationalize difference. The limited foreign influences that appear in school lunches are chosen to appeal to and to educate students, but in a way that reinforces the centrality of traditional French cultural norms.

This article offers three main contributions to our understanding of the tension between national culture and a globalizing world. First, I highlight the value of using an underexplored mainstream cultural institution (French school lunch programmes) to examine national culture. In doing so, I extend existing work that uses food as a lens for understanding national culture (DeSoucey 2016; Maxwell and DeSoucey 2016). In France, restaurants have been especially central to studies of gastronomy and national culture, because of their historical importance for the development of French cuisine (Ferguson 2004; Rao, Monin and Durand 2005). In recent years, cutting-edge high-end French restaurants are increasingly open to global influences and willing to work outside traditional French culinary paradigms (Gollner 2016). However, cutting-edge high-end restaurants are a narrow slice of culture that does not necessarily represent how globalized influences function for the French masses. School lunch programmes are more mainstream because they are a rite of passage for most French children, which builds on a growing tradition of viewing globalization and national culture through everyday life practices (Brubaker et al. 2006).

Second, I extend work about how public institutions are involved in promoting national culture. Existing research explores how the French state has pursued cultural nationalism through food labelling standards and advocating for French gastronomy to be recognized by UNESCO as a protected cultural practice (DeSoucey 2010; Martigny 2010). I complement that research, and expand on other work that explores how governments use schools to promote national culture. Scholars of the relationship between schools and national identity often highlight how classroom instruction and textbooks promote civic engagement and try to instill patriotism (Darden forthcoming; Weber 1976). My article highlights another channel – outside the classroom – for public schools to engage national culture.

Finally, I identify how national boundaries may maintain their strength and relevance by evolving and being permeable. One of the biggest macro-historical questions raised by globalization is whether nation-states will continue to be relevant (Bonikowski 2016; Soysal 1995). I address that question by building on research about cultural reproduction, which transmits values and norms while at the same time allowing those values and norms to evolve (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Similarly, the simultaneous cultural opening and cultural rigidity of school lunches may allow French national culture to adapt and remain relevant. Foreign influences are important for enticing the children and educating them about the broader world of gastronomy. Yet,
school lunch menu designers work hard to keep French traditions as the foundation and structure for each meal. Therefore, elementary school lunches may demonstrate how French culture can incorporate ideas and influences from around the globe (Ferguson 2004), while retaining a privileged position for established French traditions (Bourdieu 1994).

Case selection: French elementary school lunches

France is a good case for studying how national culture operates in a globalized era because it is one of the most politically, socially and economically globalized countries in the world but it is also very resistant to rapid cultural change (Gordon and Meunier 2001). For example, France has a long history of welcoming immigrants from around the world and considering itself a universal society that can make anyone into a French person (Noiriel 1988). Yet, among European countries of immigration, France is one of the most insistent that immigrants adopt pre-existing host country cultural norms as a prerequisite for participation in mainstream society (Favell 1998). France has the largest Muslim community in Western Europe and a long history of religious diversity with Catholics, Protestants and Jewish people. Yet, France adheres to a strict form of secularism (known as laïcité) in which the public sphere should be free from religion. In theory, laïcité is a neutral approach in which all religions are equally taboo. In practice, established Catholic traditions are often accepted while practices from new minority religions (e.g. Islam) are seen as threatening to the cultural order and are used to justify religious and ethnic discrimination (Adida, Laitin and Valfort 2016; Laurence 2012). In addition, foreign chains like McDonald’s and Starbucks are popular with the French masses. Yet, France is a European centre of social movements against examples of globalization that threaten cultural traditions (Bodnár 2003), and a fervent supporter of policies that defend French cultural products (ranging from cheese to films) from foreign competition (DeSoucey 2010). In short, France is both open to the forces of globalization and determined to maintain a strong national culture in the face of new foreign influences.

French school lunch programmes are useful for analysing national culture in a globalized world because they are designed to teach students how to eat, which is a critical aspect of French identity. The French National Education Ministry sets two broad educational goals for school lunch programmes: nutrition and taste. For the first goal, strict government regulations outline the nutritional components that should be present in each meal, and how to balance meal components over the course of several weeks. French schools occasionally offer indulgent treats (e.g. ice cream or French fries), but only once every few weeks, and snack foods like sodas and potato chips are never allowed in cafeterias (Le Billon 2012).
The second goal, taste, is defined as ‘[valorizing] the national culinary heritage and [promoting] products of good taste…’. The national culinary heritage is reinforced by serving lunches in the traditional French format of several courses: a starter, a main course with side dishes, a cheese course and then dessert. This socializes students into the traditional French style of eating, regardless of the specific dishes. French school lunches also regularly serve dishes from the traditional French gastronomical canon: quiche, beef bourguignon, ratatouille, veal ragout, endive salad, or fish in butter sauce with vegetables. All of these dishes are served at restaurants across the country and connect French children to the national culture. Promoting ‘products of good taste’ is a broad concept that can be interpreted in many ways. According to the National Education Ministry, one way to promote good taste is to use products of ‘good quality’. Another is to expose students to different aromas, textures and flavours.

Beyond the food on the plate, French school lunch programmes also teach the pleasure of sociability. French schools give students ample time (60 to 90 minutes for the lunch break, with a legally required minimum of 30 minutes eating time) to consume lunch at a relaxed pace. This broadens the focus of the gastronomical experience beyond food to include socializing with friends and taking part in the general French culture of ‘the table’. For the most part, the instructional component of school lunch programmes is more informal and subtle than classroom learning. However, French schools regularly organize special themed menus and lunchtime presentations that offer more explicit gastronomic instruction (Stengel 2012).

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine how French children interpret their lunch programmes or how they process information about national culture and identity. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this article, school lunch programmes are a valuable everyday example of how French children are exposed to messages about national culture. Analysing the content of those messages provides insight on how national culture is negotiated in a globalized world. More details on French school lunch programmes and their historical development are in Appendix A.

**Research Design**

I limit my focus to lunch programmes in public schools. French public schools are part of the French state and account for roughly 85 per cent of students, which makes them more appropriate than private schools as indicators of mainstream French culture. At the time of writing there were 54,942 public schools in France. My analytical strategy (described in the following section) requires in-depth analysis of menus and in-depth interviews with people who design the menus. Therefore it was not feasible to analyse lunch programmes...
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I select different municipalities because research suggests there is often considerable sub-national variation in the extent of globalization (Pieterse 2015). In particular, foreign influences are most prevalent in locales with more highly educated and foreign residents. Research suggests education teaches people to be open-minded to diverse cultures. In addition, highly educated elites are more likely to travel internationally and have professional and social contacts from diverse national cultures (Bennett et al. 2009). Foreign residents are more likely to live international lives and existing research finds that people with international experiences are more likely to embrace cultural diversity (Favell 2008; Rössel 2015). Therefore, I use sub-national variation in education (percentage of residents with a post-secondary education) and foreign residents (percentage of the population under age 15 without French citizenship) to select municipalities. More details on these measures are in Appendix B.

I select municipalities into two most-different regions, because municipalities are embedded in regional cultures. The Île-de-France is the region surrounding Paris and is the region with the highest levels of education and foreign residents. Lower Normandy has the lowest levels of education and foreign residents in the country. It is rural, agricultural and on the northwest coast of France; it does not attract many immigrants and does not have the dynamic knowledge-economy industries of the Paris region. Within Île-de-France and Lower Normandy I select municipalities according to the level of education and percentage of foreign residents in their population. Table I presents descriptive information on the eight municipalities in my study.

Within each municipality, I focus on elementary schools. Elementary school lunch programmes are the responsibility of the municipal government. All elementary schools in the same municipality have the same lunch menu. This allows me to use publicly available census data to track how the composition of school lunches may vary according to the demographic characteristics of a municipality. More details on the case selection process are in Appendix B.

Data

I use two main sources of data. The first is a database of school lunch menus. This provides an overview of what types of foods are present in French elementary schools. I collect the menus primarily from the website of each city government, where they are posted as public information. I began a trial run of data collection for Île-de-France in spring 2016. In autumn 2016, I added Lower Normandy and collected all available menus from both regions for the 2016–17 school year. Table II lists the months for which I obtained menus from each municipality.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>% Post-secondary degree</th>
<th>% Foreign (&lt;15 years old)</th>
<th>2012 Population</th>
<th>Number of elementary schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Île-de-France</td>
<td>Saint-Fargeau-Ponthierry</td>
<td>13.5 (Low)</td>
<td>4.0 (Low)</td>
<td>13,170</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clichy-sous-Bois</td>
<td>5.0 (Low)</td>
<td>32.8 (High)</td>
<td>30,720</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voisins-le-Bretonneux</td>
<td>40.2 (High)</td>
<td>1.3 (Low)</td>
<td>11,470</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paris – 10th arrond.</td>
<td>43.8 (High)</td>
<td>18.4 (High)</td>
<td>94,474</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Normandy</td>
<td>Dives-sur-Mer</td>
<td>4.0 (Low)</td>
<td>0.4 (Low)</td>
<td>5,867</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L'Aigle</td>
<td>5.8 (Low)</td>
<td>6.6 (High)</td>
<td>7,940</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Douvres-la-Délivrande</td>
<td>15.9 (High)</td>
<td>0.3 (Low)</td>
<td>5,072</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caen</td>
<td>20.2 (High)</td>
<td>5.5 (High)</td>
<td>108,365</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: In metropolitan France as a whole, 13.8 per cent of the population has a post-secondary degree and 5.4 per cent of the population under the age of 15 does not have French citizenship.

Sources: INSEE, Population Census 2012.
The second source of data is 25 interviews with the people who design and approve the lunch menus. The interviews provide insight into why the menu items were chosen and what the school lunch programme is supposed to achieve. The elementary school menu design process in France is a collaborative process that includes dietitians, food service providers, chefs, politicians, local government bureaucrats, school administrators and parents. The process begins with dietitians, chefs and/or the food service providers who design the menus. Depending on the locality, some schools work with large food service companies (e.g. Sodexo or Siresco) who provide the meals ready-made, have dietitians on staff, and design menus entirely in-house. Other municipalities hire independent dietitians to consult with whoever is cooking the lunches. Yet other localities have chefs in the school who design the lunch menus by themselves.

Once the lunch menus are designed (usually in one, two or three-month blocks), there is a consultation process that involves the dietitian, the food service provider, the chef, the people who serve food to the students, the local government bureaucrats in charge of educational affairs, school administrators and parents. The goal is to get input from a wide range of actors who have a stake in the lunch programme. Major changes do not often come from these consultation processes, as the people who design the menus are the professionals with the most expertise and the people who are the most invested in the process. However, the consultation process is an opportunity to raise issues (e.g. needing more local food or more organic food) that can be taken into account for future menu design. In addition, approval from the municipal government is an important symbol because the municipal government funds elementary school lunch programmes and is in charge of ensuring that the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Municipality</th>
<th>Menu coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Île-de-France</td>
<td>Saint-Fargeau-Ponthierry</td>
<td>Jan–June 2016, Sept–Dec 2016, Feb–June 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clichy-sous-Bois</td>
<td>Jan, Feb, April, May, June, Sept, Oct, Nov 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Normandy</td>
<td>Dives-sur-Mer</td>
<td>Sept–Dec 2016, Jan–June 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>L’Aigle</td>
<td>Sept–Dec 2016, Jan–June 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Douvres-la-Délivrande</td>
<td>Sept–Dec 2016, Jan–June 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caen</td>
<td>Sept–Dec 2016, Jan–June 2017</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
school lunch programme fits with the broader government goal of teaching children how to be good citizens.

In each municipality, I attempted to interview the full range of actors involved in the school lunch process. That was not always possible, but I nonetheless have a wide range of interview subjects from different roles across the municipalities. All interviews were conducted in French. Most of the 25 interviews were conducted in person, although two were on the telephone and one was via email. In each interview, I ask about the specific local school lunch programme process, why the menu items were chosen, and various questions about the motivations behind and different actors involved in the programme. More details on the interview process (including a list of questions and a list of interviewees) are in Appendix C.

Coding strategy

I code whether each menu item has foreign influences, and if so, which foreign influence. My definition of a menu item follows the menu courses (starter, main course, side, cheese, dessert). To code the main influence, I follow the same methodology used in Maxwell and DeSoucey (2016) and focus on the central element in each item. For example, pasta and pizza are always coded as Italian, and couscous and tabbouleh are always coded as North African. Spices or additional ingredients are treated differently from the central element, and if there is a prominent disjuncture between the central and the secondary elements, I capture that by coding a separate category for secondary influences. For example, ravioli with Gruyère is coded as an Italian item, with a secondary influence from Switzerland. The ravioli is a clear historical Italian tradition, so it would be misleading to code it otherwise. However, there is also a clear Swiss influence from the cheese, best expressed as a secondary influence.

Overall, the coding portion of my analysis is designed to provide an overview of how foreign influences are visible on school lunch menus. I do not claim to precisely quantify the influence of each foreign culture on the school lunch programme, in part because all coding is a subjective endeavour (Biernacki 2012). In addition, French cuisine has always prided itself on an ability to assimilate foreign influences (Ferguson 2004), which means that one cannot always clearly delineate foreign and French foods. However, this is consistent with my approach because I consider the entire school lunch programme to be a manifestation of French culture and my goal is to analyse how much and which foreign influences are present within that structure. Moreover, the interviews complement the coding by allowing school lunch designers to express in their own words how they understand the cultural work being done by the lunch programme. A detailed discussion of the complexities of coding menu items is in Appendix D.
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Results: the extent of foreign cultural influences

Figure I presents the percentage of menu items (across all meals and all dates) that have foreign influences. Figure I indicates that foreign influences range from 10 to 18 per cent of menu items across municipalities. Appendix Tables EI through EVIII offer more fine-grained detail and suggest that the extent
of foreign influences varies across the meal. Foreign influences are least present in the goûter, dessert and the cheese course (generally well under 10 per cent). Foreign influences are more prevalent among starters (ranging from 6 to 23 per cent of items across the municipalities), main courses (from 17 to 33 per cent), and sides (from 9 to 22 per cent). Overall, these results suggest that foreign cultures are clearly present (especially among main courses) in French school lunches, but are also clearly limited to minority status.

My second research question asks whether manifestations of French culture might vary sub-nationally. Panel A of Figure I indicates that the percentage of foreign influences is 2.4 points higher in the Île-de-France as opposed to Lower Normandy. This difference is statistically significant at \( p < 0.01 \), but the substantive difference is rather modest, especially considering that these two regions have dramatically different demographic characteristics. Panel B indicates that foreign influences are the same across municipalities with different percentages of educated residents. Panel C indicates slightly more foreign influences in municipalities with more foreign residents.\(^{10}\) Yet it is a very modest difference (1.4 percentage points) considering the demographic differences across municipalities.

Panel D presents results for each municipality and there is no consistent pattern. According to the logic of sub-national variation, the most foreign influences should be in Paris and the fewest should be in Dives-sur-Mer. Neither prediction is supported by the data. Paris has the fewest foreign influences of all Île-de-France municipalities, and also has fewer foreign influences than two Normandy municipalities (Caen and Douvres-la-Délivrande). Dives-sur-Mer has some of the fewest foreign influences in either region, but it has the same amount as L’Aigle despite having different percentages of foreign residents.

The lack of sub-national variation in foreign influence may be especially remarkable given my case selection, which includes Clichy-sous-Bois, a Paris suburb where an overwhelming majority of elementary school students have immigrant origins. However, the menu consistency across municipalities highlights the depth of commitment to using school lunches to reproduce Frenchness. Employees of the food service provider Siresco (which serves 16 Parisian suburbs, most of which have large immigrant-origin populations) explained: ‘there are many students with foreign origins who are not aware of typical French foods. If they don’t eat ratatouille or quiche at home, then they need to learn about it in school!’\(^{11}\) For these employees it would have been a failure of their job description if they customized lunches to the students’ cultures of origin.

One should not interpret Figure I as the precise amount of foreign cultural influence on all French elementary school lunch programmes. The data come from only eight of the more than 35,000 municipalities in France. Nonetheless, the municipality case studies were carefully chosen according to their dramatically different demographic characteristics. The relatively consistent levels
of foreign influence across municipalities is suggestive evidence that sub-national variation in education or foreign residents is not associated with different forms of cultural reproduction via school lunches. In Appendix F I discuss whether there might be alternate forms of sub-national variation in cultural influences: according to the political party controlling the municipal government, or in the form of traditional French culture being presented. In neither case is there evidence of significant sub-national variation.

How are foreign cultures represented in the school lunches?

My final research question explores how foreign cultures are represented in school lunches. The first thing to note is that foreign cultures have limited influence on the menus and are restricted to a small set of countries and dishes. Tables III and IV indicate each foreign influence and its percentage of the foreign items across municipalities. There are many foreign influences listed, but (with very few exceptions) the same five top the list for each municipality: Italy, North Africa, US, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Together, these five influences account for 62 to 80 per cent of the foreign-influenced items across municipalities (an average of 69 per cent). These are the only foreign cultures to become part of the consistent monthly menu rotation in each municipality. Results for secondary influences are consistent with primary influences, as almost 70 per cent of secondary influences come from Italy, the US, the Netherlands or Switzerland.

Even these five influences that are part of mainstream lunch culture are represented by a limited range of dishes. Italian influences are the most common foreign culture in each of the municipalities (sometimes reaching close to 50 per cent of foreign items) but 88 per cent of Italian dishes are either pasta or pizza. For the North African dishes, 92 per cent are couscous, tajine or tabbouleh. The Netherlands and Switzerland are mostly in the cheese course. For the Netherlands, 98 per cent of dishes are either Edam or Gouda cheese. For Switzerland, 70 per cent of dishes are Emmental cheese. The US is an exception, with a wider range of dishes including chilli, coleslaw, chicken nuggets, fishsticks, club salad, Waldorf salad, chicken wings and burgers.

Note that dishes like pasta, pizza, Edam, Gouda and couscous may technically have foreign origins but have become part of mainstream French (and global) food culture. The fact that these dishes are the most prominent examples of foreign influences is further indication of the limited extent to which school lunches are open to foreign cultures.

According to my interviews, the limited opening to foreign influences is a conscious and strategic approach to multiple (and sometimes competing) priorities. National Education Ministry standards structure how schools should educate students about nutrition and taste, but lunch programmes also must
Table III: Foreign cultural influences (as a percentage of foreign items) in Île-de-France

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saint-Fargeau Ponthierry</th>
<th>Clichy-sous-Bois</th>
<th>Voisins-le-Bretonneux</th>
<th>Paris 10th arrondissement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Origin</strong></td>
<td><strong>Per cent</strong></td>
<td><strong>Origin</strong></td>
<td><strong>Per cent</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>23.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Réunion</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Caribbean</td>
<td>2.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
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<td>Belgium</td>
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<td>Greece</td>
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<td>Bulgaria</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>China</td>
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<td>Senegal</td>
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<td>Germany</td>
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<td>Paris 10th arrondissement</td>
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*Note: Sample sizes in the bottom row are the total number of foreign-origin menu items.*
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Note: Sample sizes in the bottom row are the total number of foreign-origin menu items.
ensure that students eat, remain within limited budgets, and deal with logistical constraints of the industrial kitchens. Foreign foods are useful because some of them are very popular among students. In addition, exposing students to different dishes helps educate them about the broader culinary world. However, the multiple priorities for lunch programmes limits the extent of foreign influence and preserves the dominance of traditional French gastronomic culture.

Balancing student tastes and educational imperatives

A central goal for all school lunch programmes is to ensure that kids eat (some of) the food and including dishes that are popular in mainstream culture outside of school is one way of achieving that. Some of the most popular foreign-influenced dishes are US items (especially burgers and fries), Italian pizza and pasta, and North African couscous and tabbouleh. However, menu designers maintain the centrality of traditional French gastronomical norms by limiting these foreign-origin foods and presenting them from a traditional French perspective.

Every one of my interview subjects claimed that American dishes were the most popular foreign foods and would probably be well-received by the students on a daily basis. In some respects, this is evidence of how deeply globalized food culture has penetrated certain parts of French society. However, school lunch programmes are diligent about limiting US-influenced dishes to once or twice a week. This is partially because some of the items (e.g. cheeseburgers, fish sticks or chicken nuggets) are considered less healthy lunch options and must be limited to maintain the nutritional mission of the lunch programmes.12 But, there is also the imperative of maintaining a French-dominated perspective on the lunches. Cooks like Stanislas Satis and Sebastien Jouen in Dives-sur-Mer try to channel students’ preferences for American items into a more traditional French sensibility: ‘We never serve ketchup. Not with fries. Never. This is part of our general fight against la malbouffe [junk food]. Our mission is to teach and we want to show kids that they can eat things like fries without all that extra stuff.’13

Italian pizza and pasta are also very popular with students and have become mainstream food in France (and around the world) (Capatti et al. 2003). In addition, according to my interview subjects, pizza and pasta are attractive options for school lunches because they are low-cost and easy to serve. However, the inclusion of pasta and pizza is not accompanied by a deeper exploration of Italian cuisine. Moreover, the pasta and pizza recipes that appear on lunch menus are interpreted through French gastronomic perspectives, by using French (or non-Italian cheeses) like goat’s cheese, la vache qui rit, or Gruyère.

There is a similar dynamic with couscous and tabbouleh – the other main foreign influences that are served because they are so popular with students.
In some respects, consistently serving couscous and tabbouleh in each lunch programme (even in Normandy where the local population of North Africans ranges from negligible to non-existent) reflects the long history of colonialism and cultural exchange between France and North Africa. However, much like with pizza and pasta, couscous and tabbouleh are so popular that they are now part of the canon of contemporary French cuisine. According to the head of client relations for the food service provider SIRESCO: ‘I have been in this business 20 years and we have always served couscous. It is one of the most beloved French dishes. [There is no more] foreign stigma.’ Couscous and tabbouleh are also well suited to the needs of school lunches because they are filling, easily compatible with a range of meats and vegetables, low-cost, and easy to transport from an off-site kitchen to the schools.

The mainstream status, low cost and logistical ease of couscous and tabbouleh make them obvious menu choices for school lunches. However, the mainstream status of these dishes also deracinates them from North Africa and there is no imperative to explore the cuisine of North Africa in more detail. Classic North African dishes like mechoui, bastilla, rfissa, harira, makroudh or brik never appear on the lunch menus in my sample. Moreover, just as with the French-ified versions of pizza and pasta, school lunch chefs do not attempt to produce ‘authentic’ North African versions of couscous or tabbouleh. According to chefs in Dives-sur-Mer: ‘…even if the dishes technically have foreign origins – like couscous or paella – we never do it the same way as in the original country. We make it French, with less spice, different herbs.’ This is partially to appeal to the French student palate, but also because the chefs approach the lunch programme from a traditional French perspective regardless of the foreign lineage of the dishes. Therefore, school lunch programmes can regularly serve North African-origin dishes like couscous and tabbouleh (or Italian-origin dishes like pasta and pizza), while maintaining a privileged position for traditional French culture.

Exposing the students to foreign cultures

The second main reason for including foreign influences is to educate students about the broader culinary world. Part of being French is the joy of eating and appreciating the range of textures and flavours that can be found in food. This means exposing students to vegetables and fruits that they might not eat at home, as well as foreign dishes that are not typical in France. However, school lunch menu designers provide awareness of the broader culinary world in a limited way that maintains the centrality of traditional French culture.

As seen in Tables III and IV, each municipality includes a sprinkling of cultural influences from across the world, spanning Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. Many of the foreign influences that are not in the consistent
menu rotation appear on special themed menus where the meal is designed to introduce students to a specific culture. The festive nature of these menus makes them popular among students but also reinforces the cultural distance. According to a dietitian in Normandy: ‘we like to try new things, and we can get kids to be excited about it by using tricks like putting flags in the food, so they know it’s something special…. Recently we served a Greek salad with feta, it was not the favorite cheese taste for the kids, but the little Greek flag was exciting.’17 This physical marking of foods as foreign is evidence of how school lunch providers can simultaneously include foreign influences and reinforce the cultural distance of those influences from mainstream French society.

Another way in which foreign influences are limited is that they tend to be restricted to the starter, main course and side dish, while the cheese course and dessert are almost always traditionally French. The cheese course appears every day, even on foreign-themed menus where cheese is not part of the foreign culture. This follows government requirements for a daily dairy course (cheese or yogurt) and it sends the message that the French tradition of cheese is natural for every meal. According to a dietitian in Paris, the cheese course was one of the most French parts of the meal: ‘We must have a dairy course. It is part of the meal. Having dairy in the gratin does not count!’18

The cheese course reinforces traditional French culture but at times it includes foreign cheeses: Edam and Gouda from the Netherlands or Emmental from Switzerland. Serving foreign items in such a quintessentially French part of the meal could be interpreted as evidence of deep cultural openness. However, given the wide array of non-French cheeses that exist, the fact that only three foreign cheeses are served is fairly limited. This partially reflects financial constraints, because many foreign cheeses cost more money than French alternatives. In the words of a food service provider in Normandy: ‘We tried a special meal with special Italian cheeses, but it was so expensive that it messed up our budget for weeks. We will not do that again!’19 In addition, logistical concerns limit the diversity of foreign cheeses. Most school lunch programmes rely on large food suppliers for their raw materials and according to my interview subjects, Edam, Gouda and Emmental are the main foreign cheeses stocked by the suppliers.20 This likely reflects the fact that Edam, Gouda and Emmental have a long history in France and are already part of mainstream culture; all of which suggests that their inclusion does not challenge the dominance of traditional French culture.

Finally, school lunch programmes must balance the competing demands of exposing children to new cultures and ensuring that the children eat. Most of my interview subjects worked from the premise that children were more likely to eat familiar items. According to the dietitian from LAigle: ‘…it’s a balancing act between giving them new things and also things they can eat, because we need to make sure the kids get some nourishment.’21 These competing demands limit how far the school lunch providers are willing to stray from the French
canon. Another dietitian explained how the dual goals of exposing children to new cultures and making sure they are well-fed is balanced across the meal: ‘When the main course is experimental we give them something filling and traditional for dessert, so they don’t go away hungry. This is the reason why even special themed menus have French cheese and dessert.’22 All of my interview subjects expressed an interest in exposing students to flavours and foods from cultures around the world. However, those foreign cultures are presented in a limited way that does not threaten the centrality of traditional French culture.

**Halal food: an alternate form of foreign influence?**

Another way in which foreign cultures might influence French school lunches is through the introduction of halal foods to satisfy the religious demands of Muslims. Muslim parents across France (and across Europe more broadly) have mobilized to request pork-free and halal menu options that are consistent with their religious practices. Thus far these demands have been too radical and very few French schools have adopted halal foods. Instead, most municipalities (including the eight in my sample) opt for the compromise of non-pork options or more extensive vegetarian options (Le Bars 2012).23 Vegetarian options are particularly attractive because they do not violate the French conception of secular public schools and can appeal to a wide range of students who may want to avoid meat for religious, health, environmental, animal protection, or other personal reasons.

During my interviews, the people who design school lunches felt torn between a desire to respect Muslim students and the limitations on how much they could customize accommodations. French nutrition standards limit flexibility on what types of foods can be served, and logistical constraints limit the number of options they can provide. In addition, most school lunch providers view their role through a traditional French gastronomical lens, which further limits their flexibility. According to the dietitian in LAigle: ‘We have tried to be flexible with Turkish families lobbying for halal, but we won’t give halal meals. We try to give non-pork options like other meats, chicken or fish, but even that gets complicated sometimes. [French national standards] mean that everyone has the right to full and balanced nutrition so we have to provide different kinds of meat and we do not customize meals… If you only want to eat certain things, that’s your choice.’24

The issue of how school lunches can accommodate Muslim religious demands is an ongoing political struggle that reflects broader societal struggles about how to integrate immigrant-origin Muslims into the French community. More research can be done on how Muslims are becoming part of the French national culture, but at the moment there is no evidence that halal food has become a major foreign influence on French elementary school lunch programmes.
Discussion: French national culture in a globalized era

Findings in this article suggest that foreign influences are present but limited in French school lunch programmes. School lunch menu designers are aware that certain foreign-origin foods have become part of mainstream culture and would be impossible to avoid. In addition, school lunch menu designers take seriously their role of teaching students about the broader world of gastronomy. However, the extent of foreign influences is limited by the multiple competing priorities of the school lunch programmes: educating students about nutrition and taste, ensuring that students eat, remaining within budget, and dealing with logistical concerns. This suggests that French national (gastronomic) culture may maintain its strength and relevance in a globalized world by evolving and being permeable to a limited extent.

My results do not support the notion that manifestations of French gastronomical culture in elementary school lunches vary according to local demographics. My data are from eight municipalities so I cannot claim to capture all possible dimensions of local variation. However, these case studies were carefully selected based on demographic factors that research suggests should be related to foreign cultural influence. In addition, my casual observations of street life and retail options suggest there are meaningful differences across the eight municipalities in the extent to which foreign cultures are present in the public sphere. Yet, the fact that there are similar school lunch programmes suggests a broad consensus on French culinary culture.

The consistency of lunch menus across municipalities is also striking because the menus are designed locally by actors who rarely interact with peers in other municipalities. There are conferences and networks that disseminate standards and norms within the large food service provider companies. However, there are no industry-wide conferences or networks which disseminate best practices and trends across the school lunch business. Moreover, my sample includes municipalities (e.g. Paris 10th, L’Aigle, Dives-sur-Mer) where the menus are designed by independent dietitians and chefs who do not attend food service company conferences and claim to be unaware of broader school lunch trends. Yet, the same dishes and cultural influences are in school lunches regardless of who is designing the menus. In part, this narrow set of cultural references reflects widespread agreement about what (French) children like to eat. In addition, the similar type and extent of foreign influences across diverse municipalities may be evidence of how successful French national gastronomic culture has been at reproducing itself across the nation-state.

My analysis assumes that increasing global interconnectedness has led to the inclusion of more foreign cultural influences. Another possibility is that French school lunches have always included foreign influences as an acknowledgement of the value of global cuisine. I test this with historical menu data from the 1970s, 80s and 90s in Clichy-sous-Bois. A full description of results is in
Appendix G, but the main takeaway is that foreign influences have expanded over time. This suggests that French school lunch programmes reflect broader cultural developments, although it remains to be seen how the strategy of limiting foreign influences will evolve in the future.

Future research could extend this article by exploring how French school lunches are interpreted by students. Do they view the school lunch programme as examples of French culture? If not, where do they get their cues about what it means to be French? How might those cues and reference points change over the course of a lifetime? It is important to note that school lunch menu designers are aware that their lunch programmes do not reflect French culture as it is practised by the average contemporary French person. During my interviews, school lunch providers frequently lamented that ‘nobody eats this way anymore in France’ (in reference to their school lunches). According to them, the rapid pace of contemporary life means French people spend less time cooking traditional dishes, less time eating balanced multi-course meals, and more time buying pre-made convenience foods that are not nutritious and are overly influenced by global fast food culture. Given that context, school lunch providers view their work as vital, because they are one of the few remaining institutions that can promote traditional French gastronomic culture on a broad scale.

This article highlights a sensitive and symbolic aspect of culture (gastronomy) in a country (France) where the tension between globalization and national culture is particularly acute. However, the clash between those who want to preserve national culture and those who want to move beyond nation-state boundaries will unfold on multiple fronts and continue across Europe for years to come.

(Date accepted: January 2019)

Notes

1. Previous versions were presented at the University of Neuchâtel, the University of Pittsburgh, Sciences Po Paris, the American Political Science Association and the Association for the Study of Nationalities conferences. Financial support was provided by the Center for European Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the US Department of Education and the Berlin Social Science Research Center (WZB). Research assistance was provided by Katherine Aha, Eroll Kuhn and Pascale Planeilles. I would like to thank Keith Banting, Irene Bloemraad, Rafaela Dancygier, Michaela DeSoucey, Mathieu Ferry, Felix Germain, Ole Hexel, Elie Michel, Ettore Recchi, Anna Skarpelis, Florian Stoeckel, Tania Zittoun and three anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on previous drafts.

2. The 2018 KOF Index of Globalization ranked France 7 out of 209 countries for overall globalization. Globalization has been rising across the world since the 1970s when the KOF index was first calculated, but France has consistently been among the top 15 most-globalized countries. For more detail see Gygli, Haelg and Sturm (2018).

4. See Décret n° 2011-1227 du 30 septembre 2011 relatif à la qualité nutritionnelle des repas servis dans le cadre de la restauration scolaire (Decree number 2011-1227, from 30 September 2011, concerning the nutritional quality of meals served in schools) and Politique éducative de santé dans les territoires académiques (Education policy for health in academic establishments) from circulaire n° 2011-216, 2 December 2011, in the Bulletin officiel de l’Éducation nationale (Official Bulletin of the Ministry of National Education).

5. See: http://www.education.gouv.fr/cid115024/education-nutritionnelle.html
7. See Repères et références statistiques sur les enseignements, la formation et la recherche (Benchmarks and statistical references on teaching, training and research), 2016, National Education Ministry.

8. Results are consistent when I limit my analysis to menus collected during the 2016–17 school year (and thus an equal time frame for both regions).

9. Note that Figure I excludes cheese and goûter (snack) courses. Not all municipalities list goûter items and not all municipalities list the specific cheese. Yet, for municipalities with specific cheeses listed, the percentages of items with foreign influences (including cheese) are within two percentage points of the figures presented in Figure I.

10. The difference is statistically significant (at \( p < 0.05 \)) in a one-tailed \( t \)-test.


12. Even when serving US-influenced items like barbecue sauce, French school lunch providers serve them in small quantities and with a healthier recipe than the students may be accustomed to from fast food restaurants. Interviews with Patrick Berichel and Vanessa Dissake, 9 May 2016.

13. Interview with Stanislas Satis and Sebastien Jouen, 22 June 2017.


15. Interviews with Patrick Berichel and Vanessa Dissake (9 May 2016) and with Nathalie Buisson and Florence Maysounabe (11 May 2016).

16. Interview with Stanislas Satis and Sebastien Jouen, 22 June 2017.


18. Interview with Marieline Huc, 11 May 2016.


20. For example, the dietitian for Scolarest explains her limitations: ‘These [Edam, Gouda and Emmental] are the [only foreign] references available from my providers. If they were not available I would choose something else.’ Interview with Héloïse Fonnard, 15 April 2016.


23. In some cases, municipalities governed by the far-right National Front have pursued aggressive anti-Muslim policies that require pork to be served and offer no alternatives. A more detailed discussion is in Appendix F.


Bibliography


Le Bars, S. 2012 ‘Le halal à la cantine, un fantasme loin de la réalité’, Le Monde, 10 March.


Everyone deserves quiche


Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher’s web site:

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Figure BI: Selection of regions based on education and citizenship
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Table EII: Foreign-origin menu items in Clichy-sous-Bois
Table EIII: Foreign-origin menu items in Voisins-le-Bretonneux
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