

“Cooking is to feed the future generations”: anthropological study of the Trentino Tyrolean cuisine in the neighborhood of Santa Olympia, Piracicaba-SP, Brazil

Fernando Monteiro Camargo¹

¹ Universidade Federal de São Paulo. Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências Sociais, Departamento de Ciências Sociais, Escola de Filosofia Letras e Ciências Humanas.

Correspondence

Fernando Monteiro Camargo
E-mail: camargo.fmc@gmail.com

Abstract

Santa Olímpia is a Trentino-Tyrolean immigrant neighborhood in the city of Piracicaba, State of São Paulo, Brazil. This article is a reflection based on a research work ordered by the neighborhood's association, with a survey and documentation of the local cuisine. The research was conducted in years 2012, 2013, and 2014, aiming to record the Tyrolean recipes of Santa Olímpia in book form. The research process involved two stages. The first comprised the making of recipes with the female neighborhood residents, aged 40-60 years old. In the second moment, the author attended meetings of groups of women with more than 60 years to talk about the recipes. So this paper aims to show how the process of producing a cookbook aroused the narrative of the neighborhood's social history. More specifically, to reflect how emotions, meanings, social relations and the collective identity of a neighborhood can manifest from narratives that emerged in rounds of conversation about the making of Trentino Tyrolean food in Santa Olímpia. The neighborhood's recipes tell stories.

Key words: Anthropology. Food. Cooking. Memory.

Introduction

Looking at the temporalities that inhabit the memory of a people and the processes of social and cultural changes from their eating habits reveals how societies conceive their ways of living and define the social identity of their members. The memory and reflection of the processes of cooking register and documentation of a place can be an interesting aspect for the anthropological knowledge, once these processes awake feelings, emotions, meanings and transformations in the routine of human grouping.

This article originates from an anthropological study about culinary in Santa Olímpia, a small neighborhood of Trentino-Tyrolean immigrants located in the city of Piracicaba, in the countryside of the State of São Paulo. Here you will see reflections from the research commissioned for the production of a recipe book. The proposal is to show how the process of a book creation awoke the narrative of the social memory of the neighborhood. More specifically, the objective is to reflect on how the emotions, meanings, social relations and collective identity of a neighborhood can manifest from narratives created in rounds of conversation about the Trentino-Tyrolean culinary making in Santa Olímpia. From these rounds of conversations, it was possible to understand how the inhabitants of Santa Olímpia (re)construct their stories and memories through their cuisine. Having *food anthropology* as a reference, we seek to answer *what, when, how, where* and *with whom*¹ the families eat during this research.

According to Roberto Da Matta,²

Food is something universal and general. Something that is related to every human being: friends or enemies, people who are close or distant, from the street or from home, from the sky and from the earth. But food is something that defines a domain and puts things in focus. Thus, food corresponds to the famous and old "to-eat", expression equivalent to meal, as the word food is. On the other hand, food refers to something common and healthy, something that helps us to establish an identity, defining, because of that, a group, class or person.

From the recipe book to the anthropological research

The research was an initiative by the director's board of *Circolo Trentino de Santa Olímpia*,* which had a proposal of gathering data on the existing cuisine in the neighborhood and organize it in the form of a recipe book.** In the beginning of 2012, the author was invited to develop the research; he accepted the challenge because he believed he could collaborate with the transmission

* The Trentino circles are entities composed by the Trentino-Tyrolean descendants of the whole world, who work in the preservation of their culture through the promotion of several civil and cultural activities.

** The *Circolo Trentino de Santa Olímpia* established, in 2015, a partnership with the Institute for Research and Planning of Piracicaba, in order to publish the recipe book of the Santa Olímpia neighborhood.

of this knowledge to future generations and contribute to the appreciation of the local culture. The paper was very pleasurable because, besides trying all the recipes, there was an opportunity to get to closely know rich stories, feelings and memories that are present in the Tyrolean cuisine.

The food of the Santa Olímpia neighborhood is a communication vector that acts and approaches different temporalities. Around a table, in the yard of Ms. Negri^{***} (60 years old), the difficulties in feeding faced in the past are recalled and told with the abundance of the present. According to Maciel & Castro,³ Lévi-Strauss, in *Mythologiques* (1964), uses the analysis of the preparation of food to study the indigenous myths. By doing that

Lévi-Strauss has shown us that the food can be used when one seeks to understand better what makes us human. [...] Lévi-Strauss instigates us to think of food from the perspective of its semiotic and communicative function. For him, cuisine is a language, a way of communication, a complex code that allows us to understand the mechanisms of the society to which we belong, from which emerges what gives it meaning.

Therefore, the article seeks to explore the act of eating "not only considering its biological function, but also its insertion in a certain culture or society".³ For Claude Fischler,⁴ when feeding, "men nourishes on nutrients, but also on imaginaries that are socially shared." In Santa Olímpia, "typical" food moves not only daily life, but also the neighborhood parties.

Thus, the rites, although they alter and establish cuts in the daily flow, they do not compose of moments essentially different from the daily routine, once some aspects of this same daily routine are highlighted in them.

Looking at the choices of what is and can be eaten daily and what is and can be served in neighborhood parties is to see how Tiroleans create their relations with the *insiders* and how they want to be seen by the *outsiders*.

Santa Olímpia

Santa Olímpia is a neighborhood of Trentino-Tyrolean immigrants^{****} located in the rural area of Piracicaba-SP. Located at approximately twenty kilometers from the commercial center of the city, at the margins of the Piracicaba-Charqueada highway (SP-308), its foundation process

*** All the names used in this article are fictitious.

**** The region of the autonomous province of Trento is located at the extreme north of Italy. Politically, it is united with the Bolzano (Bozen) autonomous province, currently called the Trentino-Alto Adige region. It is a southern portion of the old South Tyrol, until 1918 united to the Austrian Tyrol. Its main characteristic is that the Trentino language is, historically, Italian, while in the other regions it is German.

initiated in 1881, a year when Trentino-Tyrolean families immigrated to the countryside of São Paulo to work in the coffee farm Sete Quedas, ***** owned by Mr. Visconde de Indaiatuba. In 1892, the immigrants were transferred to the Monte Alegre farm, located in Piracicaba, which initiated the process of foundation of the Santa Olímpia neighborhood. The neighborhood, currently, is a Trentino-Tyrolean colonization nucleus and, through the *Circolo Trentino di Santa Olímpia*, it is connected to the other Trentino circles in the world. Several cultural activities are promoted there, such as a folklore group with more than one hundred members, three choirs, theater groups and typical dance groups, as well as small music bands. In addition, in Santa Olímpia there are classes of the local dialect and traditional parties connected to the neighborhood cuisine.^{5,6}

Why the neighborhood cuisine?

The first stage of the research consisted of informal conversations with residents of the neighborhood connected by degree of kinship (mother, grandmother, aunt, cousin, etc.) with members of the board of the *Circolo Trentino de Santa Olímpia*. Most of these conversations was with women from 40 to 60 years old. From them, the first transcribed recipes in the registering process emerged.

When they were told that we sought information on the Trentino-Tyrolean cuisine of the families in the neighborhood of Santa Olímpia, they were surprised. They wanted to know why the author was not interested in the typical dance and the local dialect, which, for them, was something more connected to their traditions. They were surprised that the interest was the cuisine, in which, according to them, "there were no secrets". This first stage was crucial because from these women, we could establish a closer contact with other women known by everyone as "holders" of the cuisine knowledge, the *nonnas*. This first stage of conversations was always done at Ms. Negri's house (60 years old), mother of a member of the director's board of *Circolo Trentino de Santa Olímpia*.

For seven Saturdays, in the afternoon, there were meetings in Ms. Negri's yard with the intent of photographing typical meals of the neighborhood cuisine. The group ranged from 10 to 15 people that spent the afternoon talking about the "typical" cuisine of the neighborhood while Ms. Negri prepared the dishes in the kitchen that had a door to the yard.

In the kitchen, Ms. Negri prepares polenta. It is possible to watch from the door and the author is soon invited to participate: "Do you want to stir? Take it here and don't stop stirring." Stirring the pan so that the polenta does not stick, Ms. Negri is asked what it means to her to be taking part in the research of the register of the neighborhood cuisine. She answers: "I think it's

***** Currently, the Sete Quedas farm is part of the territory of the city of Campinas.

good; I think that everything we know should be put on paper because, son, cooking here is to feed future generations".

When cooking to feed future generations, Ms. Negri not only feeds and nourishes her children and grandchildren from the physiological point of view; the selection of ingredients, the way the food is prepared and the stories told around the table feed a certain Tyrolean way of living.

If it is possible to evaluate the nutritional value of the food (a fuel to be released as energy and sustain the body) the act of feeding also implies symbolic value, which makes the issue more complex, because it requires another type of approach.⁷

The conversations in the yard and in the kitchen continue... There are people coming in and out of the kitchen all the time; each one gives their opinion about the polenta that is being made; every person remembers a different way their mothers prepare the polenta and, therefore, other stories arise. Ms. Correr (45 years old) remembers that in the past the rounds of conversation were shared around a wood stove: "We all stayed around the oven... that one right there, in the corner of the yard; now it serves to accumulate things on top. That one is not even that pretty. There is one in my mother's house that is beautiful. It would be nice for you to photograph".

The gas oven replaced the wood oven, but the stories shared among them bring the rich past to the present. The proposal was to prepare a traditional meal to be photographed, but how many images arise from these ladies' voices: sometimes the hardness of planting, harvesting and grinding the corn meal, sometimes the mischief of stealing the sausage their mothers left hanging on the oven, or the "steal" of a piece of bologna that their mother sent them to get at the grocery store. What about the scolding and spanking they received when they disobeyed? How much laughter arouse today the mischiefs they did with smaller boys! The good smell of the food is mixed with the stories and laughter of the cook and of all those who arrived there. The food talks, it tells stories!

When I was little, there were no grocery stores here in the neighborhood, so we had to go to the grocery store that was in the city. My mother said, go get bologna at the grocery store, girl. I went, but in the middle of the way I had already eaten half of the bologna. It was far, boy, and I was hungry on the way! (Ms. Stênico, 55 years old).

The nonnas and their secrets

In a second moment of the research, rounds of conversations were organized with the oldest female residents of the neighborhood. These meetings happened in an old big house, headquarters for the Association of the Neighborhood Inhabitants, acquired to hold a museum in the future. From these rounds of conversation there were twenty other recipes of the Trentino-Tyrolean

cuisine (between sweets and salty food.) The main players of this phase of the research are women of above 65 years old – for the young Tyrolean, the *nonnas*. They chose what was most familiar to them, food, to transmit for generations the traditions of Santa Olímpia. For the *nonnas*, the ritual around the table is full of symbolisms that make them relive their past, showing an overcoming of the hard days caused by the migration process. The dishes are many, but the use of corn flour is predominant in many of them; corn flour is also an ingredient used to make polenta. In the words of one of the *nonnas*:

polenta... baked polenta... or polenta like this... we made polenta and then we put cheese... with egg... with sausage... ate all day... with milk... toasted on a griddle and ate with milk... polenta with milk is delicious. (Ms. Popermayer, 87 years old).

In Santa Olímpia, what marks the daily meal of the neighborhood, the staple food, is polenta, a meal made with corn meal, water, oil and spices, and it is both a main meal and side meal of other dishes. Polenta is present in at least one of the meals of the day: breakfast, lunch or dinner. At breakfast, it is usually eaten griddled, with milk. For lunch and for dinner, the way it is served varies: soft polenta, baked polenta, griddled polenta with cheese or fried polenta.

The basis for polenta is corn meal, and its use follows the whole history of the foundation of the Santa Olímpia neighborhood. In the past, the use of corn meal as a food base for the Tyrolean cuisine happened because of several factors. Among them, the high price of the wheat flour and the easiness of corn cultivation and its processing in the region.

In the past, corn was planted by all the families in the neighborhood and it was exchanged for corn meal in two mills, also built by Tyrolean immigrants. As time went by, the mills were deactivated. However, the use of this ingredient as a food base for the Trentino-Tyrolean cuisine remained, enabling the creation of the neighborhood tradition.

Corn meal and, consequently, polenta, became the identity hallmark of the cuisine, a slow process in which the inhabitants started giving a symbolic meaning to something they did due to their need for survival. The eating habits presented as a tradition enable the awakening of memories through which the inhabitants can get guidance and distinguish, expressing a certain way of life.

From the memories of what was lived emerge other older memories, told by distant generations, and as the conversation goes on we get to know life in the past.

They say that, in the past, corn meal was made with pestle, but I don't remember how it was at that time. I remember the mills well... there were two... one in Santana, the Negri's. We took the corn to the mill and exchanged for corn meal. Nowadays, we use "bought" corn meal, right? It is very different... in the past, the corn meal was better. (Ms. Degaspari, 78 years old).

When telling stories in the old house, the *nonnas* give voice to the recipes that, in turn, talk about the meetings, the emotions and transformations of the Santa Olímpia neighborhood. These recipes survived time in the memory of the inhabitants without ever being written or documented. The challenge of registering the recipes was to transform this culinary knowledge in measurements and preparation methods, besides translating the art of the spices and secrets of this cuisine. This effort allowed us to understand the Tyrolean culinary in its symbolic aspect, providing intelligibility in other contexts.

In the old house, six rounds of conversation were organized with the *nonnas*. On six Tuesdays, at 7 p.m., after the mass, I met the oldest female inhabitants of the neighborhood. In the first meeting, it was five *nonnas* taken by their daughters. Suspicious, they did not know well what they were going to do there. They found it weird to go to the old house to talk about cuisine, once this old house keeps objects, paintings and information about the old life in Santa Olímpia. The daughters took part of these rounds and contributed a lot to the flow of the conversation. Everyone sat around a large table of the old house, under the pictures of the founders of Santa Olímpia on the wall, and they started talking about the Tyrolean recipes. They talked about the ingredients, but they would get lost in the amounts, because there were differences that raised endless discussions among them. They resorted to past memories to define the exact amounts and concluded saying that "you had to decide by looking, there is no right amount, each one prepares in a different way". Their daughters insisted that they be precise in the amount so that the recipe book would be "correct".

As the meetings went by, the group grew, gathering 18 *nonnas* in the last one. All of them went there very excited to talk about their recipes and their memories. Many times, they talked among themselves in a local dialect so that the researcher would not understand — so the researcher wondered if there was any culinary secret or some comment related to him.

The memories of the *nonnas* flow and, little by little, the memories of the food reveal other stories that marked the trajectory of the neighborhood inhabitants. "At that time, everything was harder; there was no meat every day, so we had to use everything else... invent food with what we had" (Ms. Vitti, 73 years old).

From past difficulties to the present abundance

Talking to the *nonnas* about the life conditions of the first inhabitants of the place, it was seen that in the past, life at the Santa Olímpia neighborhood was very hard; the families were always numerous: the couples had up to 14 children. The neighborhood, distant from the urban area, was even more isolated from the city. The husbands left to work in the farm and only came back

by the end of the day. The responsibility of the house and the children was up to the women, that had to work hard and invent recipes to satisfy everyone. The need to use everything that was produced, together with the cooking knowledge coming from Trentino, made these women create new meals "with a Trentino-Tyrolean way of cooking."

So I was the cook... oh my God, when it was time to make... the lunch box for him... it was hard, right... because there weren't things to make it so we had to invent, it was so difficult. (Ms. Altmeyer, 82 years old).

In the past, three parties were held throughout the year: one in May, another one in December, and the *Festa della Cucagna* – on Carnival Tuesday. These were the moments of fraternization, joy and certain abundance in Santa Olímpia.

Currently, when arriving at the Santa Olímpia neighborhood, we face an environment with abundance and joy, in which there is no poverty, differently from the scenario revealed in the testimonials of the oldest inhabitants. *Cucagna*, a Tyrolean typical meal, is done with scrambled eggs and polenta, and it represents the bliss, the abundance and lots of joy; it is a symbol of the sensation that you have today when entering the neighborhood. The tradition of eating *cucagna* on Carnival Tuesday still remains. However, during the whole year, parties in which abundance and food are promoted reign, showing that the difficulties faced in the past have been overcome.

Through recipes passed from generation to generation, Santa Olímpia builds itself as a Trentino-Tyrolean tradition, uniting their inhabitants in a group that shares social codes that operate in local relations.

[...] then shred... tiny weeny sausage was fried together... cheese... egg... tomato... and beaten egg... and ate with polenta. (Ms. Altmeyer, 82 years old).

These testimonials allowed us to understand how social life in Santa Olímpia takes shape from the understanding of the place the cuisine occupies in the dynamics of the social relations of the inhabitants.

"Eating polenta makes me remember life as it was in the past" – this speech of a *nona*, resident of the neighborhood, reveals the importance of the food beyond biological survival of the human species. The act of feeding involves a symbolic system of representations, choices and classifications that organize views of the world. Cuisine, understood as a communication vector, enables the comprehension of the mechanisms through which the identity of the neighborhood of Santa Olímpia emerges and gives it meaning. Denise Amon & Renata Menasche⁸ already talked about the relationship between food and memory, and showed that food has a communicative dimension, the same as speech, and therefore, stories can be told through it.

The two main parties of Santa Olímpia have food names: Festa da Polenta and *Festa della Cucagna*.

The Festa da Polenta de Piracicaba (Polenta Party of Piracicaba) has happened since 1992 and is promoted by the inhabitants of the Santa Olímpia neighborhood with the intention of celebrating the Trentino immigration to the city. The first edition of the party, in 1992, had the objective of celebrating the centennial of this immigration. In 1993, the party was repeated, but its third edition happened only in 1999. From then on, the party happens every year, in the month of July, and its 16th birthday was in 2012.

The party gathers approximately 15 thousand visitors, who have at their disposal typical Trentino food, such as polenta con *craulti* (polenta with sauerkraut, *speck* and sausage), canederli or *knödel* (gnocchi of bread with sausage and spice, served in a chicken soup), the *polenta con cucagna* (fried eggs with tomatoes, sausage, bacon and cheese), the *strangola pretti* (green gnocchi), fried polenta, frankfurter, *gròstoi* (sweet pastry); all that is eaten with beer or wine — grape and orange, besides the grape peel distillate, *grappa* — all manufactured locally. This food and beverage is served in three different spaces: tents assembled on the street, ballroom and adapted bars. Also, a café is assembled in the basement of the association headquarters, in which they serve, besides coffee, hot chocolate, *cappuccino*, cakes and sweets produced by the inhabitants of Santa Olímpia. According to Maria Eunice Maciel,

[...] food can mark a territory, a place, serving as an indicator of identity connected to a network of meanings. We can talk about "cuisine" from a "territorial" point of view, associated to a nation, territory or region, [...] indicating places where there are delimited food systems.⁷

Besides the food and drinks, typical dances, presentations of choirs and bands of Tyrolean music are part of the official program. Masses are promoted after each festivity, holding a special place as a celebration, demonstration of religious faith whose ritual puts the community in communication with God. All the party activities, since their preparation, are carried out by the neighborhood residents, who obey a schedule of time/activities.

The Polenta Party is, therefore, a presentation of the neighborhood to the tourists. It is the way in which money is raised to make infrastructure improvements. The focus of the party is to show the outsiders the traditions. Therefore, many inhabitants wear typical clothing and take the chance to practice more the dialect during the event.

For Maria Eunice Maciel,⁷ the constitution of a typical cuisine goes beyond the list of meals, but it implicates practices associated to belonging. The meal considered "typical", the one that is

selected and chosen to be the food emblem of the region, is not always the most commonly used. It can definitely represent the way in which people want to be seen and recognized.⁷

On Carnival Tuesday, there is the oldest party promoted in the neighborhood of Santa Olímpia, the *Festa della Cuccagna*. *Cuccagna* is an expression of the Trentino dialect to indicate a bliss state, where there is abundance, there is no poverty, and there is a lot of joy, besides being the name of a typical meal.

The party initiates at 11 a.m. with a walk of the neighborhood inhabitants. Smearred with mud, walking through the streets, crossing lands and even a stream, the caravan goes on, and they are always singing. The motto is to not stay clean. This parade goes on until 5 p.m., when the polenta is served with *cuccagna*, free for everyone present. After the meal, the Carnival ball starts at the central square of Santa Olímpia, and it goes on until midnight, when it is interrupted in respect to the Lent period that starts, a sign of attachment to the traditions of the catholic church.

In the past, we used to paint ourselves black... we used black pans, right? ... one day, I went for water, because there was not piped water. It was a Carnival day; they got me, put me on the floor and rubbed the casseroles on my face. Oh my God... I was all black! Now they do this with clay, right? (Ms. Forti, 81 years old)

When naming the two main parties of the neighborhood after Tyrolean typical food, the inhabitants use cooking as a symbol of claimed identity, in which the way of life has become private, singular and recognizable. This tradition found in Santa Olímpia is part of a collective project and, therefore, is in constant transformation. Therefore, the cuisine involves incorporations, adaptations and social exchanges that are part of a historical process, taking new meanings every day.

In the research, the priority was to look at the Tyrolean women of the Santa Olímpia neighborhood; however, men also crossed some moments of the research. Such as during the Polenta Party. During this event, the kitchen is in charge of a man, Mr. Correr (50 years old). He shares this responsibility with Ms. Pompermayer (87 years old).

Although Mr. Correr knows all the recipes gathered in the research, the *nonnas* were introduced to me as holders of this knowledge of the neighborhood's cuisine. This detail may also reveal the Trentino-Tyrolean traditions. They are the guardians and responsible for feeding the future generations. After we came across the knowledge and performance of Mr. Correr, we started to wonder: why had he not been introduced to me before collecting the amounts and measurements of the recipes? Somehow, the author was directed to the uncertainties of the daily life and measurement of the recipes presented by the *nonnas*.

The Santa Olímpia neighborhood claims a Tyrolean cultural identity from several factors, such as the dialect, religion, music, clothing and what is eaten, how it is eaten and with whom it is eaten. The ritual of gathering around the table and the parties in the neighborhood tell, create and transport elements of the Tyrolean neighborhood memory in Piracicaba. The food traditions in the neighborhood accumulate the hard days faced in the past and the abundance of the present. The recipes and traditions gathered in the process of the research reveal the Tyrolean cultural identity in the neighborhood of Santa Olímpia.

Final considerations

The memory of the record and documentation process of the cuisine in the neighborhood of Santa Olímpia, for the creation of a recipe book, has shown to be a privileged study field for the anthropological knowledge. In the process of (re)construction of their culture through the parties promoted in the neighborhood, the Tyroleans claim an "authentic" culture. However, when indicating the *nonnas* as research source, the Tyroleans showed that it is in the routine that the collective memory is fed, lived and witnessed.

Inscribed in the body and in the speeches of the *nonnas*, the recipes, which emerged on the rounds of conversation, revealed to be vectors of communication and sociability of Santa Olímpia, once they go back to the historical processes of the neighborhood consolidation. It was by showing the participation of women in the overcome of hard days in the immigration of Tyrolean immigrants to Piracicaba-SP that the process of documentation and record of the cuisine acted in the appreciation of certain female memory of the Santa Olímpia neighborhood.

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