

Something to chew on: There's nothing more political than food

By *Binoy Kampmark*

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Political figures in France have publically expressed their delight that the French baguette has been added to the UN's protected heritage list, writes Dr [Binoy Kampmark](#).

ON 30 NOVEMBER, the French baguette was formally [added](#) to the United Nations' Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity [list](#).

The bureaucrats had finally gotten hold of a glorified bread stick, adding it to their spreadsheet list of cultural items worthy of preservation.

A delighted French President [took the moment](#) to gloat at the French Embassy in Washington.

Stated a glowing [Emmanuel Macron](#):

"In these few centimetres passed from hand to hand lies the spirit of French know-how."

The list, for which the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)) is responsible for observing, [includes](#) some 678 traditions from 140 countries. The Slovenians have beekeeping, for instance, Tunisia has harissa and Zambia can call upon the significance of the [Kalela dance](#).

Such traditions can span several countries: the listing of states for the [Lipizzan horse breeding tradition](#) reads like an inventory of the lost Austro-Hungarian empire, echoing [Joseph Roth's Radetzky](#) [march](#).

The traditional tea processing techniques and associated social practices in China were added to [#UNESCO](#) Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on November 29, including Tae Tea, Gong Tea, De'ang Sour Tea, Yunnan Black Tea, and Xiaguan Tea in [#Yunnan](#). pic.twitter.com/5woCugb08Y

— Amazing Puer (@AmazingPuer) [December 5, 2022](#)

The baguette, one of France's grandest "gastro-native" examples, is celebrated as a labour-intensive product marked by patience.

Lengthy fermentation periods are required, including wheat of appropriate quality, leaving a distinct gold crispness. Fats are eschewed, as are any improvers or additives, which are [prohibited](#) by the decree of 13 September 1993. The characteristic cuts with 14 facets act like ceremonial scars. It is also the hallmark of the traditional *boulangeries*, which are struggling, notably in rural areas, to survive.

The grinning Macron exclaimed:

“Many have tried to make it; they just made something industrial which has no taste. And this ‘French touch’ we have in our baguette is the one we have in other sectors: It’s this additional know-how, this extra soul. So, congratulations to our baguette for today.”


Macron’s dig at the industrialised, quickly-made baguette is well-founded and it was appropriate for him to be doing it in the land of mass-industrialised food practices. But the baguette has become, in time, a French imperial marker with local variations.

The Vietnamese famously have their [Bánh mì](#), which has become an international food presence across the global diaspora, though modifications in terms of part substitution of rice flour for wheat flour take place. The influence in western and northern Africa is also clear. The streets of Dakar are [marked](#) by baguette stands.

As food is as much a political statement as a culturally boisterous one, political figures [expressed](#) their delight at the baguette’s listing.

French Minister for Culture [Rima Abdul Malak tweeted](#) about the ubiquity of the baguette in terms of French habits:

‘Morning, noon and evening, the baguette is part of the daily life of the French... a great recognition for our artisans and the unifying places that are our bakeries!’

Matin, midi et soir, la baguette de pain fait partie du quotidien des Français. Ce savoir-faire artisanal vient d’être inscrit au patrimoine immatériel de l’humanité par l’UNESCO. Belle reconnaissance pour nos artisans et ces lieux fédérateurs que sont nos boulangeries!  pic.twitter.com/dkAGPD5PiR

— Rima Abdul Malak (@RimaAbdulMalak)
[November 30, 2022](#)

Another important figure in promoting the baguette’s case for UNESCO recognition, full-contact baker [Dominique Anract called](#) the announcement “*good news in a complicated environment*”.

As president of the National Federation of French Bakeries and Pâtisseries, Anract almost struck a wistful note about old habits:

“When a baby cuts his teeth, his parents give him a stump of baguette to chew off.”

Much of this belies the fact that the French, as serious as they are about eating bread, consume less of it and are facing changing lifestyles and the hollowing out of its evocative rural villages.

Since 1950, the [consumption of bread](#) has fallen by a startling two-thirds. But modern food politics demands modern laws — and recent promulgation demands the use of certain percentages regarding the use of wheat. Eventually, much is at stake for the continued making and consumption of this thin bread morsel.

For an individual such as [Steven Kaplan](#), a Brooklyn-born historian who has spent almost all his academic life focused on bread, the UNESCO addition could only cause [displeasure](#).

The ecstasy of French politicians about the baguette belies the fact that such a listing will simply serve to encourage inferior alternatives. Under the generic term of “*baguette de pain*”, as opposed to “*baguette de tradition*”, the white flour baguette – ‘*which is generally of very mediocre quality*’ – is legitimised.

Says Kaplan:

‘For me, who has long campaigned for artisanal savoir-faire, this is an appalling regression.’

Whenever a committee meets, politics will arise. The decision-making of UNESCO is no exception. Was there a reason why Ukrainian borscht soup needed to make the list? Yes, according to committee members, because of Russia’s warring efforts in Ukraine.

A gastronomic threat had been identified, with UNESCO [claiming](#):

‘... armed conflict has threatened the viability [of the dish]... people not only cannot cook or grow local vegetables for borscht but also cannot gather [to make the dish]... undermining the social and cultural well-being of communities.’

[Borscht](#) brings its own brand of [culinary politics](#) and charting countries which consume this soup is akin to revisiting dead empires and their shadows (Imperial Russia and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.)

Перемога у війні за борщ- наша! [?][?][?][?]
Як і всі наступні[?][?][?][?]
На позачерговому засіданні Міжурядового комітету з охорони нематеріальної культурної спадщини за зверненням [@MKIPUkraine](#) “Культура приготування українського борщу” внесено до Списку

нематеріальної
культурної спадщини
[@UNESCO](#)
pic.twitter.com/iTMNu
[b1ZO1](#)

— Tkachenko
Oleksandr
(@otkachenkoua) [July](#)
[1, 2022](#)

[Igor Bednyakov](#), the
chef at Moscow
restaurant Bochka,
[advises](#) that the
Cossacks cooked up
the stew during the
[storming of Azov](#) in
1637 — a fascinating
twist to the tale that
has done little to
neutralise Ukrainian-
Russian debates on
the issue.

Ukrainian food
nativists, for one, point
to earlier dates and the
addition of beetroot,
while the Russian
Federation's Ministry
of Foreign Affairs is
[adamant](#) that borscht
is a “symbol of
traditional cuisine” and
a “timeless classic” of
Russian origin.

*Not only do they want
to steal our territory,
comes the Ukrainian
retort, but they want to
appropriate our
dishes.* Be that as it
may, empires may
perish but the dishes
linger, their origins of

necessity lost.

The UNESCO listing of
borscht was merely
another front in the
battle between Kyiv
and Moscow.

[Exclaimed](#) Ukrainian
Minister of Culture and
Information Policy
[Oleksandr Tkachenko](#)
:

*“Victory in the war for
borscht is ours!”*

Food, as late celebrity
chef [Anthony Bourdain](#)
[reminded](#) us, really is
politics.

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