

chapter four

# Becoming Food

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EDIBILITY AS THRESHOLD  
IN ARCTIC NORWAY  
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ACTS OF EATING NOURISH RELATIONS, MATERIALIZE SOCIAL DIFFERENCES, and maintain cultural norms, as foods are effective vehicles for negotiating the boundaries of what is acceptable. These are well-known insights from food studies, yet the implications of such axioms remain underexplored, as the study object “food” is often taken for granted. How does food emerge in the first place? How do entities recognized as food come into being in the lively fabric of life?

This chapter explores a set of moments when entities become food, or when they shift from being food to becoming something else. As I pay attention to these shifts, I also invite the reader to let those generative moments linger, because it is precisely at such moments, when things are not yet edible or edible no longer, that significant transformations occur. Such moments highlight food and eating as sites of interspecies encounters, heterogeneous assemblages through which various sets of relations are stabilized and reaffirmed. Analyzing such moments as *thresholds* allows us to consider how food comes into being in situated and relational practices and helps bridge

the gap between approaching food as a social signifier and approaching food as a material substance.

Anthropological studies of food and eating are drenched with meaning as a topic of scholarly concern. One implication of this is that one may easily overlook how a conceptual category, such as food, is itself the outcome of situated practices and specific ways of shaping worlds. In this chapter I suggest that food is itself an arbitrary way of stabilizing worlds so that, once it is done, it renders the process of coming into being invisible (Blaser and de la Cadena 2019). Hence, while interpretative approaches to food and meaning provide important insight, they rarely question food as such, what it is and how it comes into being. This chapter is an attempt to pay attention to the latter by drawing on interpretative ethnography as well as on material semiotics (Law 2004).

This chapter starts from the premise that food does not exist outside the practices that make it so. Rather than looking for the meaning of terms, or objects, I draw attention to the situated practices through which they come into being (Yates-Doerr 2015, 319). I approach practices involving food and eating not merely as the representation of a taxonomic essence (ethnicity, gender, occasion, and so on) but as processes through which the very categories of “food,” “eater,” “relation,” and “social person” take form and are enabled, challenged, and maintained.<sup>1</sup> The status of food as edible and the status of a person as an eating subject are thus mutually constituted through practices of eating. The concept of *thresholds* is mobilized to discern the various practices that are involved in stabilizing and negotiating boundaries, such as that between edible and inedible.

A common concern in culturally oriented food studies is how sensual experiences of taste become public (e.g., Counihan and Højlund 2018). I shift the attention to how the boundaries between insides and outsides are negotiated and maintained between private and public, edible and inedible, or in the maintenance of social groups, and how such boundaries are enacted through practices of, for example, slaughtering, eating, giving, and receiving (see also Vialles 1994; Weiss 1996; van Daele 2018).

Thresholds, as Amy Moran-Thomas notes (this volume), call bodies into question. Similarly, they call food into question and draw attention to the transformation of “animal to edible,” the fleshy practices transforming, as I will elaborate, a reindeer calf into an evening snack, or a leftover filet of cod into an inedible substance. Meat is of particular interest in this context, because, as anthropologist Noëlie Vialles (1994) has elaborated, it is shaped

in moments that conjure thresholds of living and dying and in relations of one body being “given over” to another. The notion of being given over serves here as a reminder that life and death are shifting states that unfold in various relations to each other. Hence, “given over” facilitates a shift from the Maussian gift exchange to relations that are not so clearly reciprocal and less reliant on circuits of return (Cohen 2013; see also Solomon, chapter 5). The purposeful slaughtering of an animal with the intention of producing meat creates one such relation, but it is not the only way in which the occurrence of death in one body sustains life in another. Hence, as we shall see, the making of meat—and the making of relations such as kin—can involve enactments that vary from that of being “given over” to that of “giving away.”

The ethnography that follows is from Varanger, a northeastern peninsula in Finnmark, North Norway, and spans three decades of ethnographic engagement.<sup>2</sup> Finnmark is both part of Sápmi, denoting the Indigenous parts of Fenno-Scandinavia, and part of the Norwegian nation-state. At the latitude of northern Alaska, and characterized by permafrost and low summer temperatures, parts of this region are also considered to be Arctic. The population has historically been diverse, with many languages spoken (Sámi, Norwegian, Finnish, Russian, and Kvæn), and with migratory patterns of subsistence. During the late nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, Indigenous minorities (Sámi, Finnish, and Kvæn) were subject to harsh measures of Norwegianization, including stigmatization of the Sámi and the denial of Sámi ancestry, widely recognized today as a political and cultural scandal (Østmo and Law 2018; Lehtola 2019; Lien 2020). The recognition of the Sámi as an Indigenous people and the creation of the Sámi parliament in 1989 are a political response to that scandal, but “continued state-mediated pressures on Sámi land-related practices” still persist (Østmo and Law 2018, 358).

I am interested in how the circulation of fish, cloudberries, and reindeer flesh—as well as culinary advice and acts of eating—constitute relations between people as well as between people and landscapes. The culinary materials are affordances of the local landscape and seascape that can be harvested, picked, fished, or caught (Lien 2001). Attentive to how edibility is performed, I focus on eating, sharing, and naming, asking how such practices can make or unmake food as a category. I detail moments when (in)edibility is performed, as dead bodies, plant material, and living beings are constituted as food through practices that engage thresholds of accessibility, of identity, and of edibility and thresholds of life and death. These are often intertwined, but I will describe them separately, starting with access and accessibility.

## Thresholds of Accessibility: The Cod on My Doorstep

February 1985. The wind from the Barents Sea was ice cold, and darkness still filled most hours of the day. I had arrived in Båtsfjord, a fishing village on the Varanger coast, a few weeks earlier. From my window I could see trawlers approaching the harbor with catch for the processing factories. But the only fish accessible in local stores was frozen fish sticks mass-produced by Findus. “You get your [fresh] fish at the factories,” people told me. “But give them a call first, to make sure they have it ready for you.”

I began to make phone calls, but there was always a problem. Sometimes the trawler had just arrived, and they were too busy. Other times they had just left. After a couple of weeks, I told a woman I had just interviewed about my bad luck. She got up and made a quick phone call. When I returned to my flat, I found a bucket full of freshly gutted cod at my doorstep, expediently delivered by taxi from one of the processing factories where her husband happened to work.

The cod at my doorstep became my entry into a network of food exchange that was unfamiliar to me as a Norwegian “southerner.” I was grateful for this sign of social recognition that the fish might imply, and analytically intrigued by this gesture toward a world of food reciprocity so strikingly Maussian (Mauss [1954] 1991). What sort of relations might this cod speak to, and what sort of community had I, by this token of generosity, been included within? What was expected in return? The cod at my doorstep became my dinner but also an ethnographic moment inviting further analysis. I learned that giving and receiving food are key modes of sociality in Finnmark but also a practice that differentiates, enacting subtle boundaries and hierarchies (see Lien 1989, 2001; Kramvig 1999).

Much analytic effort has been spent decoding the category of the gift at the expense of materials themselves, their temporalities, and the more-than-human relations they embody or from which they emerge (Ingold 2011, 20). Fresh cod is highly perishable and must be dried, salted, frozen, cooled, or otherwise preserved, or find its way to somebody’s kitchen more or less immediately. Sharing the catch of the day with kin and neighbors made a lot of sense when small-scale fishing was common and industrial processing less developed than it is today. It can also be seen as a social investment in a situation of precarity. Access to food is a way to secure access to a good life.

In hindsight, I think that my attempts to make the cod in the bucket “speak” were too insistent. Today I would rather see the cod as *an enabler*, a gesture that would allow me to begin to play, if I was so inclined, like a first

dealing from a deck of cards when the rest is open ended. As for relations, the woman hardly knew me. This was not the beginning of a long-lasting friendship, and I think it was never meant to be.<sup>3</sup> But over the years other relations have emerged and become stronger. Food gifts are still abundant and are an important part of the social interaction in Båtsfjord.

Cod is caught at sea; its availability depends on fishing boats and hence on one's relations to those who work onboard or in the local fish-processing industry. In this way, while it is abundant at sea, cod is also experienced by some as a scarce resource. Cloudberries, on the contrary, are mostly available to anyone who is willing and able to pick them during the summer season. Picking berries is time intensive but generally does not require any special gear other than an able body. How, then, does gifting berries differentiate? What do *they* speak to?

### Thresholds of Accessibility: “God’s Chosen and Those Worthy in Need”

I never left Hanna's house empty-handed. Even when she was old and frail, she insisted on giving me something. Usually it was a tin of frozen cloudberries. I knew that someone would have picked them for her and that her regifting might gradually deplete her precious supply. When, on one of my last visits, she fetched yet another tin of berries from her freezer, my first impulse was to suggest that she should save them for another occasion. Cloudberries are precious gift items. As a local saying goes, “Cloudberries are for God's chosen and those worthy in need” (Herrens utvalgte og verdig trengende). But I had also learned that the gift of cloudberries was not so much about our relation as about her, a woman still capable of passing cloudberries on to a guest. Rather than a gift with an obligation to return, the cloudberries were more like a relay item, situating both of us in a network of food gifts that has woven people and places together across differences and across generations. They are orange-red and bittersweet, and their taste evokes the warmth of the sun and the abundance of marshes in the mountains nearby. The only appropriate thing to do with Hanna's cloudberries was to be grateful and accept, which I did.

There were many women like her in the village, women whose persistent eagerness to share became a key marker of their way of being in the world.<sup>4</sup> Some “had elderly” whom they gave to. The recipient would typically be seen as “worthy in need,” but their neediness was tactfully silenced. Often the gift

was disguised, by transforming it into a request for a favor: “My husband caught such a lot of pollock this morning, can you please take some?” or “I had so much leftover cake yesterday, could you help me out so it doesn’t go to waste?” Such practices of giving reflect differentiated access and affordances, and express how people’s lives have been intimately connected to food-procuring practices at land and at sea. For women of the older generation, cloudberries, haddock filets, and fresh-caught fish weave people together, performing *their* way of belonging through local affordances. Skilled practices of procurement are themselves enacted as the food is given away. Thus, when Hanna gives me cloudberries, she inscribes herself—and me—in a landscape that she knows well but that she can no longer sense directly. References to marshes and hillsides are not explicit, but it is as if they linger in the gift itself, as a haunting or a longing, reflected in our shared appreciation of the berries’ preciousness. This is not an instance of “making taste public” but a subtle and highly gendered mode of being in the world that is recognizable across much of this region and that cuts across ethnic distinctions, so that what Hanna does, as a Norwegian-speaking woman, is not very different from what a Sámi-speaking woman might do.

### Thresholds of Identity: Shifting Notions of Being Sámi

When I first conducted fieldwork in Båtsfjord in the mid-1980s, none of my friends identified as Sámi, and I was told that there were practically no Sámi-speaking people in Båtsfjord (see also Eidheim 1969). I later learned that some of those who identified as Norwegian when I met them would have spoken Sámi when they grew up (for details, see Lien 2020).

Around the turn of the twentieth century, state policies of colonization erased Sámi place-names from maps and silenced Sámi speakers so that many of the postwar generation learned to be monolingual, without access to the Sámi language that their parents or grandparents spoke (Helander 2004). During World War II, Norway was occupied by the Nazis. As a result of the Nazi military tactic of scorched earth toward the end of the war, in 1944, and the annihilation of entire villages along the North Norwegian coast, fifty thousand people were forcefully evacuated. This brutal uprooting of an entire population caused a serious setback in the region but paradoxically also created opportunities for stigmatized Sámi to “remake themselves” as Norwegian when they returned and to take part in the rebuilding of villages according to Norwegian ideas of progress (Lien 2020). Hiding traces of Sáminess, many

people stopped speaking Sámi and never taught their children their mother tongue.

Can practices of knowing exceed the words that capture them? Might the practices of picking and sharing cloudberry offer a way of belonging that transcends the rupture, and the muting of a mother tongue? Whether Hanna grew up as Sámi is something I will never know. But many others did, and many would engage in coastal subsistence practices that were more or less the same across ethnic distinctions. Perhaps it is not so surprising, then, that the Sámi language enacts realities that are, in some ways, more appropriate than the Norwegian words that we actually spoke.<sup>5</sup>

One such Sámi term is *meahcci*, a concept that is related to place, movement and use, seasons, and affordance in the landscape. It is described as “a landscape where the natural resources are found” (Schanche 2002, 163) but also as “a densely textured and changing network of identity sustaining and respectfully negotiated long-term movements and encounters between lively, morally conscious, and often powerful human and nonhuman actors” (Østmo and Law 2018, 358). Various prefixes specify *meahcci*'s affordances so that, for example, *luomemeahcci* refers to the place you pick cloudberry, *guollemeahcci* is where you may fish, and *muorrameahcci* is the place you chop wood (Rybråten 2014, 81; Schanche 2002). In this way, *meahcci* captures the landscape not as passive foil but through the active engagement of knowing people and animals that together constitute the land as resourceful. The Norwegian vernacular variably denotes such areas as wilderness, nature, or *utmark* (literally, “outfields”), in contrast to *innmark* (“infields”), which denotes the fields of the sedentary farmer. But the Sámi term *meahcci* exceeds such distinctions. It bears witness to entanglements of persons, animals, stories, and plants that constitute the landscape as valuable at any given moment, in a place where the division between nature and culture makes little sense. Hence, *meahcci* cannot be disentangled from practices and affordances that secure viability for humans and nonhumans; it is fluid and multilayered (for details, see Ween and Lien 2012; Joks, Østmo, and Law 2020).

*Meahcci* also points to various thresholds of accessibility that are at work simultaneously. With this in mind, we may see how it is precisely the practices of procuring-receiving-giving that constitute certain food items as precious, and how relational practices that facilitate their mobility constitute persons as well as food. The following ethnographic example adds further nuance to accessibility through its focus on thresholds of life and death. We move from the coast to a mountain plateau, an area designated as and for a reindeer-herding *siida*, and to people who mostly identify as Sámi.

## Thresholds of Life and Death: Enacting Meat through Practices of Separation

The sound of reindeer hooves against the sand fills the air, and occasionally we hear the deep murmur of a female reindeer calling out for her calf. We are outside the wooden fence of the reindeer corral where people have gathered to help mark the calves. Such annual gatherings include those who are reindeer owners through kinship relations to this particular *siida*, and sometimes their children or immediate family.<sup>6</sup> Inside the corral, female reindeer and their calves run around in large circles. A dozen people are gathered in the middle, the owners of distinct “reindeer marks” and their family and friends. They are here to identify their calves and to provide them with an earmark (a distinguishable cut) and a green tag with a number, signifying the calf’s relation to a specific human owner and its registered identity in relation to the Norwegian state.<sup>7</sup> Calves are being grabbed by the horns and held until someone else arrives and helps push them to the ground, squatting over their backs, to hold them still so that they can perform the cut and tag the mark on the calves’ ears. Some days earlier, the calves were equipped with number plates around their necks, and their mothers were spray-painted with a colored number. Since then, people have spent many hours observing the calves’ and their mothers’ bonding behavior in order to identify their respective parental relations. Such observations are noted on a written list that then connects calves and their human owners (the owner of a female reindeer that gives birth is also by default the owner of its offspring). Hence, every time a calf was caught in the corral, a person called out its number and the first name of its proper owner, who would then immediately step in and mark his or her new calf.

But the operation can be harmful. Occasionally, the calf is held too forcefully, and the horn breaks. If the fracture is close to its head, the calf will suffer and is therefore slaughtered on the spot. One day when I was watching, this occurred twice. Each time, Anders, the leader of this *siida*, was called on to remove the calf from the corral. Once outside, he cut its throat immediately, left it to bleed, and performed an emergency slaughter soon after. I had brought a camera, and as things happened quickly, I switched to video. The snippets of film were no more than a few minutes each, but they have allowed me to notice details that constitute the transformation of lively animal into edible meat in some detail.

Below is a description based on these film snippets. The people involved are Anders and two boys aged approximately ten and fourteen, whom I refer



to here as the younger and the older boy. Anders left it to the two boys to take care of the calves and to ensure that they bled out properly. I describe the unfolding events in detail, because they display a set of interrelated practices at the threshold of life and death, of animal and edible.

SCENE 1: BLEEDING THE CALF AND CUTTING THE HEAD OFF

*A reindeer calf lies on its side, bleeding from its throat, occasionally kicking its feet while one of the boys pushes its rib cage and shoulders to the ground. Blood runs slowly onto the grass. The boys take turns holding it steady until the spasms subside and the pool of blood grows bigger. The other boy calls out, "Look! Shall I show you how to get more [blood] out?"<sup>8</sup>*

*He lifts the calf's head, and more blood is released from its throat.*

*A few minutes later, Anders returns with a small knife. He squats by the calf's head and makes a cut along the length of the throat, down to the chest, and then he cuts the windpipe and esophagus at the throat, pulls them out, and hands them to the older boy, saying, "Hold this!" Meanwhile, the young boy touches the ribs while he comments on the possibility of poo inside the calf's stomach, giggling at the thought. Anders makes a cut from the calf's nose toward its ear. As the calf's neck is cut open, a greenish substance appears, and the young boy shouts, "What is that yucky stuff there?" The older boy explains that it is the stomach acid, stomach contents, adding, "Isn't it, uncle?" while the young boy repeats that it is disgusting!*

*Anders ignores his comment, continues to cut around the throat of the animal, and explains, "I just have to stop this stuff getting into the meat, you see." The young boy responds, "Yes. Since we want meat, don't we!" When the calf's head is released, Anders bends its jaw backward, picks up the knife, and makes a precise cut that releases the tongue. He places the tongue on top of the calf's head and returns to the corral.*

During the course of just a few minutes, several thresholds are engaged. First, there is the uneasy transition from life to death. The calf's throat is already cut, but spasms require that the boys hold it down while they ensure that it bleeds properly; and with this bleeding, life ebbs too. As they perform this task, they experiment with the forces of gravity. They calmly watch the blood cover the ground while the kicking subsides. The moment of death is neither marked nor mourned.

Discomfort occurs when the young boy notices the green substance. It is not until the contents of the calf's stomach are exposed that he shouts out that this is yucky. But the sense of disgust is partly settled when the older one

names the substance, offering a more precise term (stomach acid, stomach contents). Anders's additional explanation that he is trying to stop the green substance from getting into the meat seems to settle the matter, and these two moves of classifying and then naming the purpose of the ongoing separation (performed by the knife) are significant here. Anders performs an act of physical separation, and it is at this very moment—when the green stomach contents are physically separated from the rest of the carcass—that the calf's flesh is verbally designated as meat. At this point, the young boy's feeling of disgust is replaced by acceptance, and he exclaims, "We want meat, don't we!" With the expression "*we want meat*" he associates the meat not only with his uncle but with an unspecified group. The reference to people wanting meat comes almost as a release; through his verbal enacting of the animal's purpose as food, the preceding acts of bleeding and cutting and exposing disgusting substances make sense to him. But what sort of "we" is enacted?

#### SCENE 2: RELEASING INTESTINES—NEARLY BECOMING MEAT

*A few minutes later, another calf has been bled, and Anders is back with a much bigger knife. He has turned the other calf over on its back and opened its hind legs so that the lower part of the stomach faces upward. Squatting over it, he makes a cut around the anus and genitals. Then he sticks the tip of the knife carefully into its abdomen just below the ribs and slowly makes a straight cut through the hide and skin toward the anus. The older boy sits next to him, holding the calf's hind leg. Anders cuts again around the genitalia, releasing muscles and tendons so that the hind legs open up more, and the skin is pulled back, revealing grayish intestines. Then he places the knife on the animal's hind leg and reaches into the animal's stomach with both hands and grabs hold of the intestines. Anders notices the knife resting on the calf's leg and hands it to the young boy, who takes it, but then the older one takes it away from him. The young boy turns around and says to the older one, with a smile, "I know how to hold a knife!"*

*In the meantime, Anders has released the intestines from the body and placed them on the ground next to the calf. He grabs one of the hind legs and says to the young one, "Here, hold the foot!" whereupon the boy picks up the calf's hind hoof, pulling it slightly so that the cavity opens up again while his uncle continues to cut tendons and skin around the hind legs. The young boy looks at his uncle's big knife and says, "Look at that slaughter knife!" whereupon the uncle replies, "It is a Finnkniiv, this one."*

As the knife passes from the young boy to the older one, a certain hierarchy is established between the boys, but not without some resistance from the young one, who insists that he knows how to hold a knife. Anders asks him instead to help hold the calf's hind leg. As the boys admire the slaughter knife, Anders names the knife as is commonly done in Finnmark: "Finnkniv," or "Sámi knife." In this way, he also instills a sensibility in the young boys about a certain categorical identity, a Sáminess.

In the next scene, the designation of the dead calf as meat becomes solidified, and the reindeer is transformed into food. Through acts of sharing and through culinary evocations, the calf passes the final threshold from inedible to edible.

### SCENE 3: ENACTING MEAT THROUGH SHARING

*Suddenly another voice is heard; a young woman has arrived, and she asks Anders, "Can I take a head?" Anders responds, "Yes! It is best when it is boiled. You can ask uncle. He likes to boil heads. Just take it."*

*The young woman asks if she should take the tongue as well, and Anders replies that, yes, she can take it. The woman responds, "I fried tongues yesterday. This one is so small. It is just enough for a piece of bread. An evening snack."*

*In the meantime, Anders has separated membranes from the inner organs, and reaching inside, he releases another large, red chunk of offal. Then he calls out again to the young woman, who is here with a friend: "Would you like to try liver? Liver is the best."*

*Meanwhile, the older boy gently touches the foot of the calf, placing his hand in the cleft between its two toes and cuddling them slowly. Anders cuts the remaining membranes that connect the liver to the body, lifts up the liver, and hands it to the woman and her friend, saying, "Here, take the liver, and then you can cook it on sticks over the fire."*

*The young woman, who has been standing behind him, watching, with the calf's head in her right hand, now receives the liver with her left hand, while Anders turns back toward the calf. Another woman says that she has seen her dad do that, and Anders adds, "I have done that many times. On a fire." The woman giggles and says, "OK!"*

*Still busy cutting the calf, Anders suggests that she should throw it on the barbecue, and the young woman then calls out to the group that has gathered around them: "Shall we make a fire tonight and do that?"*

*Anders adds, "Sliced! Finely sliced!"*

*While Anders gives culinary instructions, he lifts up another chunk of offal; cuts it apart, letting the remains fall onto the ground; and says to a man who has just arrived, "Here, hold this." The young boy asks, "Is that the heart?" Someone confirms, and the boy responds, "Aren't you going to dry the heart?"*

*There is no answer, and in the meantime, Anders lifts the calf's hind legs, while the older boy takes the front legs, and together they carry it over to the side and lay it down, gently. Someone inside the corral calls out the name of the man who is currently holding the calf's heart, and asks him to come over to help out. He replies, somewhat reluctantly, "Robert is not doing anything. I am doing something!"*

*The young boy shouts, "It is something. It is a heart that he is holding!"*

The last scene shows how separate chunks of flesh and offal are distributed to various people and thus repurposed as food. Until someone asked to have it, the tongue and the liver were part of the calf's dead body lying on the ground, not yet distinguished from what would soon be discarded as waste. But as soon as a woman expressed an interest and related having fried a tongue the night before, Anders proposed other culinary practices, such as barbecuing liver over the fire and slicing it thinly. Together they enacted the dead calf, not only as generic meat but as a culinary delicacy. In this way, the animal became edible, literally, as Anders grabbed ahold of various inner organs and identified them by name.

Shortly afterward, we see the young woman smiling, liver in one hand and a calf's head in the other. It appeared that this was not a trivial experience for her but an occasion to be incorporated within a setting and a kind of commensality that was slightly out of the ordinary, hence the culinary instructions. Not unlike the cod on my doorstep, the liver in her hand can be seen as an invitation to engage in relational practices that weave a sense of community in and around what we may think of as *meahcci*.

Anders is happy to share these delicacies with her, but he is also concerned that relatives who have inherited the right to own a reindeer mark through their *siida* family relations are properly socialized. They may be somewhat inexperienced in relation to life in the reindeer corral, but they should at least learn what it is about and learn to appreciate and respect this way of life. The reindeer marking can be seen as a semipublic event that offers ample opportunities for this kind of "passing over" of knowledge and skills. Anders appears to be mindful of this and performs his role well.

The unexpected casualty at the reindeer corral offers a glimpse into the becoming of food at the threshold of life and death. It also introduces a third

and final dimension, which concerns the practices of separating animal from edible.

Food is enacted through practices. These may be material acts of separation, such as when intestinal content is separated from muscles, or a when liver is released from an injured calf's body. But they may also be verbal expressions, speech acts, that perform the substance as a potential food gift or a delicious snack when barbecued over the fire. The transition is not inevitable: it takes work, it calls for manual as well as classificatory and culinary skills, and it is a collective endeavor involving mutual confirmation at each step. In this way, it can be interpreted as an example of "making taste public," in the sense that taste is produced "in our communication, through our hands and craftsmanship, in our sharing of values and activities" (Counihan and Højlund 2018, 3). Through these examples we see how the threshold between inedibility and edibility is indeed ambiguous and negotiated, and continuously enacted and acted on.

Unlike common slaughter, this instance of killing was hardly planned. The dead animal was a casualty, and the act of killing was justified by reference to the animal's anticipated suffering. Its transformation to meat was not obvious; instead, the meat emerged almost as an afterthought, as a way to ensure that the animal would not be wasted. The following day, when I visited Anders in his summer camp, two calf hides were nailed to a wall to dry, while meat had been hung inside the *lavvu* (a temporary dwelling supported by several wooden poles; these structures are often placed next to houses and used for various activities such as smoking meat), where a fire made with salix branches had been burning for hours. Over the next few days, several visitors would be offered a piece of smoked calf meat to take home. The unplanned slaughter and the subsequent transformation from animal to edible allowed new connections to be made, as the various parts of the calves' bodies were distributed across a wide geographic area.

Industrial slaughter typically occurs out of sight, invisible, characteristically escaping the attention of consumers and eaters (Vialles 1994; Blanchette 2020). The process is a linear logical chain of intention, action, and effect, and its destined eaters are anonymous. In the case described here, the meat was enacted through relations of sharing, relations of the *siida* and of the *meahcci*. The calf literally became edible as it was given away, and simultaneously, by that token, it enacted Sámi relations and traditions.

The two final examples concern how edibility can be negotiated through modes of preparation and through the act of eating. Let us return to the coast and a meal that took place many years ago.

## Culinary Thresholds: Preparation as (Failed) Enactment of Edibility

It was a sunny afternoon, and we had made a bonfire behind an old farmhouse in the abandoned village Syltefjord that now served as a recreational home for weekends and holidays. We barbecued sausages over the fire, but as the refrigerator also contained boiled cod from the day before, I suggested we could wrap it in tinfoil and heat it over the fire, so that it would not go to waste. My friend thought it was a good idea. But when her elderly father realized what we were about to do, he objected. This was clearly not how cod should be prepared, in his opinion. We argued that there is nothing wrong with heating cod over the fire, just as we would with char, trout, or fresh salmon. But the old man was skeptical, and as we began to eat, he dismissed the fish with an expression of disgust.

“*Ufesk*,” he said.

“*Ufesk*? This is not *ufesk*; it is cod,” his daughter insisted.

But the old man refused to even taste the tin-wrapped parcels of cod from the barbecue. Clearly, to him the content was inedible.

*Ufesk* is a term in North Norway that refers to all the fish in the sea that one would not want to eat and was commonly used in the 1980s (less so today). Literally translated as “unfish,” it stands in opposition to the fish species that are edible, which are also referred to by specific names (cod, haddock, pollock, salmon, and charr). When something unexpected is caught, categorizing it as *ufesk* is a way of saying that it is inedible. It does not need to be named or classified according to any species taxonomy. It just needs to be disposed of.

In the 1980s the boundaries of *fesk* and *ufesk* were frequently negotiated. Some people had begun to name a few of the species previously referred to as *ufesk*, and their potential edibility had become a matter of conversation. The two most common were catfish (*steinbit*) and monkfish (*breiflabb*), which had recently made their way onto the menus of fish restaurants in cities such as Tromsø. But for most people in Båtsfjord, these were still *ufesk*.

In the preceding example, the transformation from edible cod to inedible *ufesk* was not about species categorization but about modes of preparation. While *ufesk* is a generic category for all species of fish that are seen as unsuitable as food, my friend’s father mobilized the term to mark what he saw as an unacceptable way of *preparing* this particular fish. For him, barbecued charr would be acceptable, whereas cod should be steamed. It does not belong on a barbecue. The example shows how species categories are fluid and depend on divisions and practices other than conventional taxonomic schemes. As

Emily Yates-Doerr (2015) shows in her ethnography from highland Guatemala, meat can take ontologically diverse forms. The preceding example underscores her more general point: that species classification does not refer to a naturally ordered essence but is rather “an occurrence of coherence situated amid ever-transforming divisions and connections” (309). Hence, for a cod to remain cod after death (and not become *ufesk*), certain culinary practices are called for. My suggestion to place it on the barbecue was clearly not among them.

In the example from the reindeer corral, acts of separation followed by anticipated culinary transformation, and the act of giving away, enacted the dead calf as meat. In the case of the reheated cod, it is precisely the culinary preparation that *strips* the fish of its edible potential and thus of its identity as fish (*fesk*). It is reverted to the category of the unnamed, the “unfish” that are, by definition, inedible.

The final example introduces a further nuance to the thresholds of edibility, suggesting that edibility can also be enacted nonverbally through the act of eating.

### Thresholds of Consumption: Eating as Enactment

The soup was made with broth from the head of a freshly caught salmon and seasoned with garlic, chives, a few carrots, and cream. I thought it was delicious, and so did my friend. I had prepared it in her kitchen; as a young ethnographer and frequent houseguest, I was often referred to as “the housemaid.” Fish soup was usually not made this way in Båtsfjord in the 1980s, and salmon would not normally find its way into soup. But today it was dinner, and my friend, her husband, their two children, and I had gathered around the table. We chatted but not about food. Then my friend asked, “So how do you like the soup?”

The question was for her husband, who was more reluctant to try new things than the rest of us. Perhaps it was also a way of bringing some explicit appreciation to the table, an acknowledgment of my efforts to cook them a meal.

There was no answer, just the sound of spoons full of soup lifted, then swallowed. Her husband continued to eat, while she repeated the question. He remained silent, continued to eat, and then reached for a second helping. Once again, my friend posed the same question, adding that he “could at least say something.”

Slowly, almost reluctantly, her husband began to form a sentence: “It is,” he said. “It is . . .” We waited while he searched for the right word. “It is edible” (Den er etandes).

And then he looked down and continued to eat.

The vernacular phrase *etandes* (edible) is a colloquial term in the North Norwegian dialect that captures not only digestibility but also a sense of quality in a context in which the taste of food is often not subject to much verbal elaboration (Lien 1989). His response was not a dismissal of the soup, nor was it impolite. I see it now as the awkward encounter between two modes of valuating, or qualifying, food: one that relies on a verbal repertoire of descriptive signifiers, another enacted nonverbally through bodily practices, such as eating. The former was my way; the latter was his, but also the way in which most families, and especially men in this region, would acknowledge their appreciation of food in the 1980s: appreciation in the act of eating, but no words, no further gestures than what the embodied performance of appetite can reveal.

Talk happens, of course, and especially among women with a special interest in food, such as my friend and me. For months we had enjoyed cooking together, and she had taught me difficult things like making savory fish cakes, baking lefse, and salting a leg of lamb. Gradually, she had also become familiar with my more verbalized approach to food and adopted it, to some extent, amid our practical tasks. But her husband was not very interested in our kitchen practices. Suddenly pushed to express appreciation in a mode he was not used to, he was reluctant to respond. With his final response, “It is edible,” he gave in to his wife’s expectation that he would “say something,” and yet his statement was only an affirmation of what he had enacted all along (and emphasized through his second helping): the soup was edible—it was *etandes*. It was, quite simply, food. Whatever we had done in the kitchen was less important than the result: it was edible, and his act of eating was his preferred mode of confirming this and thus of enacting edibility at that moment. His brief verbal response (“It is edible”) can be seen as a way of meeting us halfway: a compromise that recognizes the social need to acknowledge the cooking skills of the visiting anthropologist-housemaid but that simultaneously refuses the ontological shift that any other verbal response would imply.

The word *edible*, *etandes*, can be seen as a gatekeeping device, policing the threshold of what is acceptable as food and what is not. Such boundaries shift; new items have been gradually added to the domain of edible food. My point is that in addition, and only *partially connected* to such changes in



food habits, another shift was taking place: a shift between different modes of acknowledging, or valuing, food, that is, from nonverbal to verbal modes of acknowledgment (Lien 1989; see Heuts and Mol 2013 for a related discussion).<sup>9</sup> The difference is related not only to which items get classified as food but also to the modes through which food is enacted ontologically.

In an analysis of connections between taste and place in Sámi food activism, Amanda Green (2018) draws attention to how the taste of reindeer fat, although highly appreciated, is only vaguely articulated among her research participants. She points to what she calls a “fat-vocabulary vacuum” (2018, 174) and cites Amy Trubek, who argues that “taste evaluations must occur through language through a shared dialogue with others” (Trubek 2008, 7, quoted in Green 2018, 174). She then suggests that the notion of *terroir*, a notion clearly recognized among her interlocutors, though only vaguely articulated, could be strategically deployed in asserting Indigenous (Sámi) rights to their lands. While I sympathize with her intention, I disagree with the stated premise that taste evaluations must occur through language. If food is habitually enacted through nonverbal practices that simultaneously perform a range of *other* socially and culturally significant relations, there is a risk that increased verbalization, rather than enhancing the valuation of reindeer meat, could imply an ontological shift that would in fact weaken the assemblage that such meat relies on in order to come into being. Indigenous rights are not only about rights to territory and clever marketing but also about ontological sovereignty.

In Båtsfjord in the 1980s, a small emergent “chattering class” of local urbanized foodies were already quite adept at verbalizing local taste distinctions. But beyond this fairly small group, a different mode of ordering was (still) at play, one that was hardly verbal at all. Eating and sharing meals were rarely associated with verbal descriptive appreciation or valuation of food, as this seemed unnecessary or inappropriate. How, then, were judgments shared? How was “taste made public” (Counihan and Højlund 2018)?

As I have suggested, food was enacted through the act of eating. A few times, when some kind of qualification had to be made in advance and at a distance—such as when preparing for a trip to the Canaries, for example—the word *edible* (*etandes*) was mobilized.<sup>10</sup> As a proxy for the act of eating, the term *etandes* ensured that friends and family would navigate successfully through the confusing isles of Spanish grocery stores, accessing what was needed to enact a proper meal. As edibility defines food, it also orders the lively world of living beings that occasionally end up on a plate. These examples speak to how

edibility is enacted at the threshold of eating; more precisely, they concern edibility as relational practice, through a nonverbal medium of bodily ingestion.

### Concluding Remarks

A study of food and eating practices can be epistemological and interpretative, with “food” as a category defined a priori, questioning how shifting connections between “food” and “people” affect the cultural dimension of both, asking, for example, how different people know, perceive, or attach meaning to various foods. But it can also be ontological, in which case the very category of food is unstable from the outset. This approach facilitates an understanding of how eating both transcends *and* marks boundaries between food and self, and between the inside and the outside of human bodies and social persons. While the ethnographic snippets in this chapter lend themselves to both modes of analysis, I have leaned toward the latter. Rather than assuming that food exists a priori as an element that may transcend cultural boundaries, I have argued that both food and persons are constituted through the act of eating. I have focused on how the act of eating and the process of becoming edible enacts food as an ontological entity.<sup>11</sup>

Our reliance on a language that distinguishes humans from nonhumans, landscapes from their affordances, and human identities from practices makes it hard to avoid an analysis in which agency is distributed beforehand, skewed toward the human as an acting subject. It makes it hard not to imagine landscapes’ affordances as if they were already there for the taking, ready to be mobilized for various life projects. But there are other options.

In Finnmark, where many food gifts are procured from and through what Sámi speakers might call *meahcci*, the local valuation of gifts reflects an appreciation of skills involved in their procurement and the effort it takes to bring things home. Perhaps, if we consider the act of giving and receiving in light of the fluidity and flexibility inherent in this concept of *meahcci*, we might be able to shift our analytic habits too, transcending the sharp separation of giver and recipient and of *meahcci* and food. Perhaps we may consider the possibility that the frozen cloudberries, the codfish in the bucket, and the freshly cut reindeer tongue are not first and foremost “food” that is subsequently “gifted” by and to certain “persons” but rather practices of procuring–receiving–giving away that constitute these “foods” as edible *and*, simultaneously, the “givers” and “recipients” as socially significant persons. We may notice how the relations that allow things to travel constitute people as significant beings in a

world where boundaries among people, things, landscapes, and affordances are less sharp than conventional analysis tends to make them.

Just as *meahcci* cuts relations differently, we may imagine that the acts of eating, giving, and receiving cut worlds differently too. “Enacting food through eating” is a way of pointing to *other* relations than those conventionally associated with culinary valuations. Instead, we may notice relations that seamlessly connect the practices of procurement, preparation, and digestion in ways that weave together the land; the people involved in the making, giving, or receiving; and the foods thus performed. Just as the act of giving and receiving can confirm or dismiss relations as socially significant, the act of eating (or refusing to eat) confirms or dismisses some things as edible while implicitly validating, or acknowledging, the many relational practices that brought them to the table in the first place.

As we have seen, the process is not smooth: barbecuing the wrong fish, failing to separate stomach contents from the reindeer meat, or refusing to receive a tin of cloudberries may disrupt relations, stop the flow, or rearrange the order of things in ways that undercut edibility and thus unmake potential mutual relations of valuing and sharing. In this perspective a local culinary repertoire that may seem somewhat narrow to an outsider turns out to be not narrow at all. Instead, it draws attention to relations other than mere taste, to the rich unfolding of the many connections and relations that include *meahcci*, relations, and seasonal affordances. Food emerges, then, neither as “tradition” nor as “eating habits” but as heterogeneous assemblages through which the world and “nearly everything” in it may be negotiated, enacted, performed, or dismissed.

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#### NOTES

1. The argument in this chapter draws on material semiotics. Another way of saying this is that if a statement about something (naming bread as food, for example) seems straightforward, then this is “because most of the assemblage within which it is located has been rendered invisible” (Law 2004, 88).

2. My first long-term fieldwork in this region was in 1985. Except for recent ethnography from the reindeer corral, most of the ethnography is from the 1980s. All persons are anonymized.

3. Later I learned to access fresh fish myself. I skipped the phone call that would reveal my Oslo dialect and walked directly to the factories. As I tried to ignore subtle sexual remarks from fishermen outside the factory building, I learned the emic term for fishing luck that was said to follow sexual intercourse (*hail*) but also learned always to bring a plastic bag (how else can you carry the fish back home . . .). I further learned that such skills were not shared by everyone. The obstacles experienced by newcomers in acquiring fish locally were significant.

4. Hanna sent parcels of fish filets to visually impaired people. She had met them at the regional hospital, where she had learned of people who have to eat fish with their fingers for fear of swallowing a fish bone. Having worked at the fish-processing factory, Hanna took pride in her excellent bone-picking skills. Now retired, she purchased haddock and cod from local fishermen, carefully removed every tiny bit of bone, froze parcels of filets, and sent them by mail to recipients all over Norway.

5. There are many terms that resist translation, including *siida* and *meahcci*. I am thankful to Solveig Joks, Liv Østmo, and Mikkel Nils Sara for discussions. For a discussion about Sámi words and translations, see Østmo and Law (2018); Joks, Østmo, and Law (2020).

6. According to the Norwegian Reindeer Husbandry Act, the *siida* is defined as “a group of reindeer owners that practice reindeer husbandry jointly in certain areas” (Sara 2011, 138). However, as in the case of *meahcci*, *siida* is also a concept that transcends English and Norwegian distinctions between the social and the natural. According to reindeer herder and Sámi scholar Mikkel Nils Sara (2009, 2011), *siida* can refer to a specific area, a corporate group, a set of family relations, a form of governance, a way of engaging specific affordances, and a migratory herd of reindeer. Reindeer herding is characterized by active engagements in relation to their reproduction and seasonal migration across great distances. In short, a *siida* can be thought of as a territorial, economic, and social unit, or as a socio-ecological system associated with nomadic and seasonal reindeer herding. According to Sara, a significant dimension of the *siida* continuity is the knowledge that can be transmitted from one generation to the next through the *siida* processes of adaptation to local surroundings, anchored in practices *in place*.

7. The information partly overlaps, as everything can be found in the state registry. But earmarking is also traditional Sámi practice, and even though the physical cut may seem superfluous, reindeer owners I spoke to insisted that an earmark was necessary in case the green tag got lost.

8. Anders speaks Sámi fluently, and the boys are fluent too. On this occasion many people who did not speak Sámi were present, and Norwegian and Sámi were spoken interchangeably. The verbal exchange surrounding the slaughter was spoken mainly in Norwegian.

9. Frank Heuts and Annemarie Mol (2013) touch on this when they describe eating as one of the many different performative formats that valuing (food) can take. The point I wish to push here is slightly different: I suggest that the different formats that are presented (and that constituted a more general shift in Båtsfjord at the time) were not about differences in “valuing food” but speak to *different ontological enactments of food as such*. The soup, in other words, was not established as food prior to being consumed. Contrary to Heuts and Mol, who based their study on interviews about tomatoes in the Netherlands and who suggest that the act of valuing tomatoes through eating simultaneously “finishes them off,” I argue that rather than “finishing it off,” the act of eating constituted the soup as food in the first place.

10. The word for edible—*etandes*—was also used when confronted with strange and unfamiliar items. For example, when planning a trip to the Canary Islands (a common tourist destination), women in their fifties and sixties would advise less experienced travelers through references to the food available there in relation to its being “edible.” Potatoes, they said, were *etandes* in the Canaries. Certain cuts of lamb would be *etandes* too. Fish, on the other hand, was questionable and often not edible in this part of the world. Some planned their holiday menu in advance and brought nonperishable ingredients in their suitcases, such as *bokna fesk*, a semidried cod that can easily be transported and stored. The idea that one might see the experience of culinary difference as an additional attraction seemed irrelevant.

11. That it simultaneously enacts people as sociable, or reluctant, participants around the table, or the reindeer corral, and thus confirms relations of affinity and belonging, is a point that is made repeatedly in studies of food and eating. These enactments take place in my examples too, but I have chosen not to elaborate on these aspects here.

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