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STRATEGIES OF MIDDLE-CLASS DISTINCTION AND THE PRODUCTION OF INEQUALITY IN FOOD MEDIA TEXTS: GOOD FOOD AND WORTHY FOOD CULTURE IN MAINSTREAM BROADSHEET JOURNALISM

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ABSTRACT

This article examines discourses connected to distinction and the middle class in the journalistic context of organic and local food. The analysis investigates how good food and worthy food culture are understood in the Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat. Through discourse analysis, the article asks how economic or cultural privilege is made visible or invisible in the texts, and do these strategies utilize middle-class ideals in legitimizing hegemonic food culture.

This article focuses on a) discursive strategies employed in upholding class-related inequality and b) the aesthetics through which middle-class culture is portrayed as legitimate. The analysis introduces four discourses present in the data: Reassurance of equality, Cultural strategies of distinction, Authenticity, and Nostalgia. The article concludes that these discourses secure the hegemony of contemporary middle-class food culture that relies on depoliticized understandings of food practices as being merely manifestations of individual lifestyle in contrast with relating to cultural or economic resources.

Keywords: Journalism ▪ Middle class ▪ Taste ▪ Distinction ▪ Discourse analysis ▪ Food ▪ Ethical eating

1. INTRODUCTION

Food is a convenient cultural field when it comes to *distinction*: to stay alive we all need to eat and to eat we need to consume and so, through food consumption, the values that unite us with culturally like-minded people and simultaneously separate us from others are visible in our daily practices. In addition, in the contemporary

culture where conspicuous consumption is quickly becoming unfashionable, through food consumption – that is performed out of necessity compared with purchasing jewellery, for example – we can exhibit our unique identities, make distinctions and simultaneously reject any moral suspicion relating to reckless consumption. Food media yields considerable power in bestowing symbolic capital and in distinguishing particular foods as worthy food choices. The cultural struggle over food is widely fought in the public discourses of journalism.

This article examines the discourses connected to taste, distinction, and the middle class in the journalistic context of organic and local food. The analysis delves into hegemonic and ‘classed’ evaluations of what constitutes legitimate food culture, and aims to map the ways in which good food and worthy food culture are discursively produced in Finnish mainstream journalism: how meaning-making regarding food is connected with social class and what kind of aesthetics are deployed in depicting certain foods or food practices as legitimate. The article approaches journalistic food texts by focusing on the themes of, firstly, the discursive strategies employed in upholding class-related inequality and secondly, the aesthetic characteristics through which middle-class culture is portrayed as legitimate. The article asks the following: How is economic or cultural privilege made visible or invisible in the texts? Do these discursive strategies utilize middle-class framings or aesthetics in legitimizing hegemonic food culture?

In the context of Finnish society, only few studies have focused on mediated meanings of food (see Väliverronen, 2007; Jauho, 2013), and food media’s relation to legitimate taste or class cultures has received very little scholarly attention. This article aims to fill this gap and bring new insights into the existing international research on classed discourses of contemporary foodsphere as well. According to Johnston and Baumann, the study of food culture can help us better understand the complexity of inequality, and how it is socially reproduced through mundane, everyday practices (2015, p. viii). In the public sphere of journalism and other media, these everyday practices become a crucial part of lifestyle politics that affect the nature of our social identities and citizenship. In a mediated culture saturated with food talk, central questions of today’s society can be examined through tracking the discourses and the taken-for-granted ideologies produced in food media texts (van der Meulen & Wiesel, 2017, p. 22) – the discourses connected with food function as windows to social and cultural hierarchies.

2. JOURNALISM, THE MIDDLE CLASS AND ETHICAL FOOD DISCOURSE

Food pages have been a part of newspapers for over hundred years (Voss, 2014, p. 1), both as helping hands for cooking mothers and as investigative reports looking into food scams. Food journalism has transformed itself into a valued part of the newspaper with sophisticated stories and critical exposés (Brown, 2004, p. 50). For the most part, food journalism falls into the category of *lifestyle journalism*, which serves the

public by providing judgements of taste and by arbitrating “taste cultures”, spotting culinary trends and identifying particular foods as worthy food choices (Fürsich, 2013, p. 12; Johnston & Baumann, 2007, p. 170). Food media frames also dictates what the environments of food consumption should be, how they should operate, and for whom they exist (Johnston & Goodman, 2015, p. 209). The analysis of food media texts pays attention to both the culinary lifestyles and legitimate aesthetics of contemporary food culture as well as the distinctions that are based on (mostly class-, gender-, and race-related) cultural and social power.

The study of class investigates the power relations in our societies. Classes are not so much based on the personal qualities of individuals but rather on their positions in the social sphere and on the relative distance of these positions in relation to each other (Purhonen & Roos, 2006, p. 36). This article focuses on the cultural contexts of social class: cultural hegemony rests on ideologies and structures that ultimately either support or restrict people’s access to economic, social, and cultural resources. Cultural mechanisms have an essential role in the shaping of class positions, and class status is affirmed and distinction created especially through consumption (Melin, 2010, p. 225).

(Good) taste is an essential stake in the class-based struggle on cultural hegemony as well as a central instrument of symbolic power: through taste, we classify others and become classified ourselves (Purhonen et al., 2014, p. 16; Bourdieu, 1984, p. 11). Gronow states that the lifestyles of the members of a social class are more or less homogeneous, and tastes are thus class tastes. The legitimate taste of a society is identified with the taste of its ruling class (2002, p. 28). In cultural studies, middle class is understood as the hegemonic class (f. ex. Skeggs, 2004).

The journalistic perspectives on lifestyles are mainly formed through middle-class understandings in the discourses of influential media. That is why the theories on middle class in particular play an important part in my analysis. The standpoint of my article is grounded on British and US cultural studies (e.g. Skeggs, 2004; Lawler, 2004; Shugart, 2014) where the middle class refers to a hegemonic culture and the values it upholds rather than on individual existing members of the middle class. In addition, the concept of middle class does not refer to middle-income, but points to middle class as an identity with the power to transfer other, less privileged identities to the margins of our culture.

Since the 1960s, the expansion of the welfare state in Finland can be thought of as a middle-class project that emphasised universal public services, benefit schemes and better education (Karonen et al., 2017, p. 47). Culturally, this welfare state narrative gave birth to a strong cultural myth of ‘classlessness’ of Finnish culture. In the 2000s, social and economic trends of increasingly uneven distribution of wealth and insecurities in the labour market have brought the classes back into public discourse (Kolbe, 2010).

In the context of class structures, one major difference between Finland and many other European societies is the lack of a historical feudal nobility (Wright et

al., 2013, p. 335) and thus the dominant class culture does not stem from a historically elite upper class but from the professionals of the upper middle class. In academic accounts, the upper middle class is often (see Kahma, 2010, p. 35; Melin, 2019) depicted as the highest stratum in Finnish class hierarchy. In this context, it is relatively safe to assume that the cultural hegemony and life-stylistic legitimacy in Finland is mainly produced according to urban, upper-middle-class tastes.

Helsingin Sanomat as the number one newspaper for urban Finnish professionals relies on a practice of the middle classes producing news for the middle classes. The class structure of Finnish journalism has not been adequately studied, although in one study journalists were reported of being a central part of “the core of the new middle classes” (Melin & Kehälinna, 1988, p. 30). In saying this, my aim is not to verify some middle-class mentalities of journalists and thus journalism in Finland but to try and draw some sort of picture of the potential norms and lifestyles that might influence the lifestyles portrayed in *Helsingin Sanomat*.

Examining middle class as a political entity gains us access to the ideological meanings imprinted onto middle-class culture. Middle-class lifestyle – agency, temperance, respectability, and good taste – appears in our culture simultaneously as ordinariness and as the criterion for good life. The hegemonic cultural practices entangled with middle-class existence obscure the fact that material disparities impact the stakes with which we try to pursue the middle-class ideal of “good life” in our contemporary culture (Lahikainen & Mäkinen, 2012, p. 8). The middle class classifies itself through difference, and in this analysis as well the distance from others defines the existence and the place of the middle-class standard.

The middle classes have gained a significant foothold in legitimate food culture in recent decades and this shift can partly be credited to the rise of *omnivorousness* in the global cultural sphere. The cultural evaluations previously based on stark boundaries between high-brow culture and popular culture have experienced a transition to cultural omnivorousness (Peterson & Kern, 1996). In food culture, omnivorousness manifests itself as an emphasis on democratic ideals as well as through the transformed understandings of good taste. This ideology of democratic cultural consumption refers to a cultural backlash against snobbery. Within the democratic ideal, the appreciation of different identities and ethnicities is celebrated while conservative taste and formal fine-dining seem to be out of vogue (e.g. Johnston & Baumann, 2015). However, omnivorousness does not imply indifference to distinctions. Rather its emergence suggests that the rules governing symbolic boundaries are changing, and *high-brow* and *low-brow* are being replaced by more complex hierarchies between legitimate and illegitimate (see Peterson & Kern, 1996, p. 904).

In contemporary culture, both middle-class distinction and omnivorous inclusivity are linked to ethical consumption. Ethical consumption can be defined as purchasing and using products according not only to the personal pleasures they provide but also to ideas of what is right in a moral sense (Johnston et al., 2011, p. 295). Ethical consumption is dubbed as sustainable, ecological (or eco-), natural, or green,

depending on the context. A correlation between high education, high income or high cultural capital and positive attitudes towards ethical consumption has been identified in various studies (e.g. Carfagna et al., 2014; Niva et al., 2014). Highlighting both individual consumer choices and the common good is characteristic of the cultural discourse of ethical consumption (see Johnston et al., 2012). The discourse portrays ethical consumers as active agents who bring about change. What makes this portraying conflicting is the fact that ethical eating discourse has an undeniable moral tone, as well as a connection to class privilege (p. 1092).

Privileged groups are generally better positioned to engage with this discourse (Johnston et al., 2012, p. 1092). According to Zimmerman (2015), ethical consumerism provides resources for a new kind of classed lifestyle that promises to mitigate anxieties about the ecological and social harm caused by class hierarchies, middle-class lifestyle and capitalist “business as usual”. Many of the implementations of ethical eating can be regarded as elitist: cooking, gardening and visiting farmers’ markets all require significant leisure time, physical and geographic mobility, and financial resources inaccessible to many working-class individuals. Zimmerman (Ibid., pp. 33-34) points out that this results in a moral hierarchy where only those with the means to take up these practices can self-realize as moral selves and good citizens. Narratives around eating habits are central to contemporary debates about what kind of subjects are socially valued (Cairns et al., 2010, p. 596).

3. DATA AND METHODS

This article is based on data drawn from the digital archives of the newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. The data consists of news articles mentioning *organic food* and/or *local food*, entailing a total of 414 news texts published in 2011–2013 and 2016–2017¹. *Helsingin Sanomat* was chosen for this analysis because it is the most widely distributed daily newspaper in Finland (Media Audit Finland, 2017). As the only national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* represents authoritative publicity and journalism that can be seen as having power determining the influential phenomena in the Finnish society (see Lounasmeri, 2006, p. 3). In its ethics policy, *Helsingin Sanomat* stresses a stand for a society of a multitude of values, democracy, and social justice (2013).

This article is based on a combination of two separate analyses that draw from the data depicted above. The analysis and results presented here are therefore based both on news articles chosen on the grounds of 1) food being mentioned in connection with social class, standard of living, other economic factors or cultural status as well as on the grounds of 2) the material generating positive publicity towards organic and/or

¹ The data is comprised of two separate time spans due to separate instances of data collection, firstly for Master’s thesis material in 2013 to 2015, secondly for dissertation material in 2017. News images have not been analysed for this article. News texts on radio and television programming, literature, theatre and music reviews, as well as recipes for meals were excluded.

local food. These samplings direct the analysis 1) toward meaning-making practices, the production of distinctions, and the significance attributed to social class and 2) toward understandings of food defined as good, legitimate, and worthy. The data sets were formed using content analysis focusing on the content topics and on the tone of the texts, respectively.² The two samplings together amount to 123 news articles (see Figure 1).

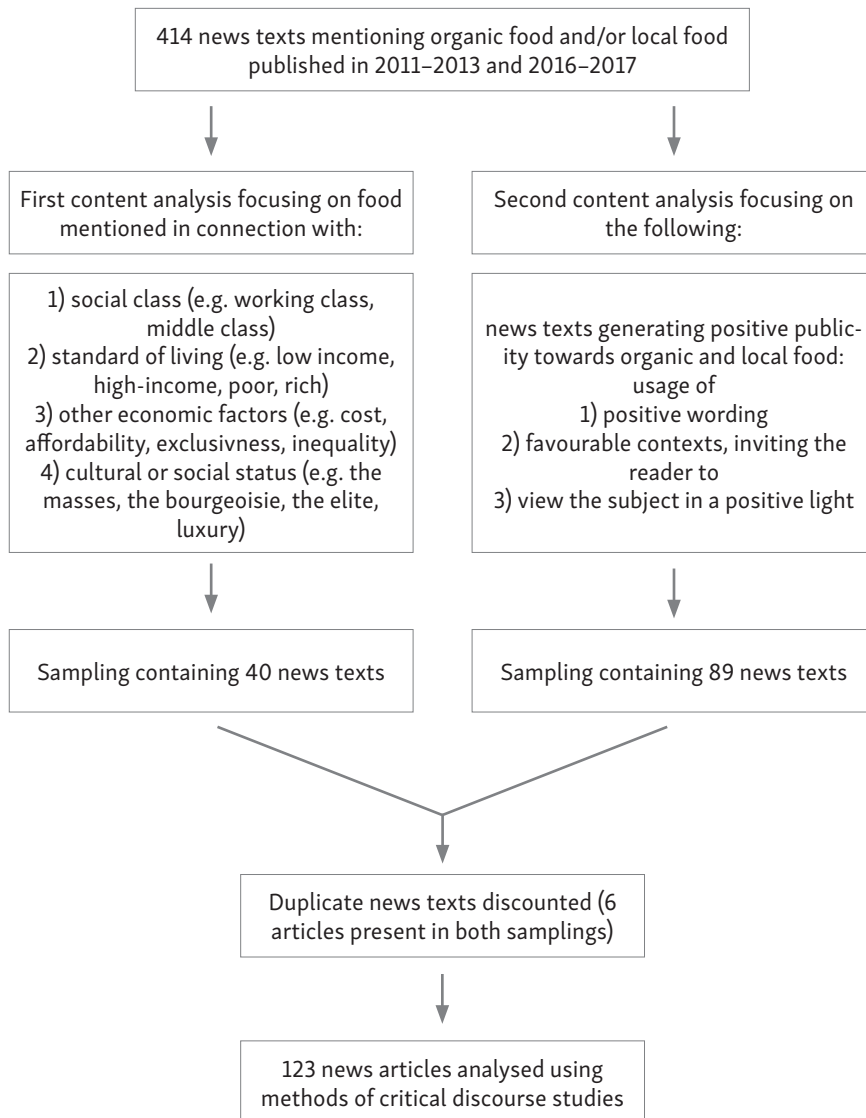


Figure 1. Sampling procedure.

² Due to the restricted space assigned for this article, parts of the primary analyses have been left out. Regardless, the analysis presented here is representative of the material analysed.

The analysis of these 123 texts utilizes the methods of critical discourse studies. The concept of discourse is understood in this article as a pattern of communication representing our social reality from a specific point of view, and as always historically produced and interpreted. Discourse is essential to cultural and political action, and discursive practices both constrain and enable ways of thinking and thus writing about the normalities of everyday life (see Foucault, 1981). In critical discourse studies, discourses are thought to take part in structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control (see Wodak, 2002, p. 2). Critical discourse studies aim at unveiling the mostly invisible dynamics and specifics of power by concentrating on their linguistic manifestations (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). In this analysis, I have relied on a toolkit of critical discourse analysis by Machin and Mayr (2012) and on a listing of ideological structures of discourse by van Dijk (2015).

Attention was paid to the following lexical and ideological choices: Are individuals or groups framed as active or passive or as “possessing individuality” in general? What kind of actors are understood as active subjects? What seems to be sayable, i.e. what are the discursive limits that determine the range of statements that are discursively possible? What kind of collective symbols (cultural stereotypes) relating to food culture(s) are utilized in the material and how those symbols affect the way their context can be perceived? What kind of evaluative statements concerning groups of people are present? Special attention was given to statements and values presented as “given” (and as such, especially ideological in nature).

The analysis in this article is not limited to the textual parts mentioning organic or local food, but it treats and analyses every news article as a whole, regardless of whether organic or local food is the central topic of the text or more of a side note. Organic and local food function more as windows to food media than as limitations restricting the discursive findings.

4. STRATEGIES OF CLASS DISTINCTION

The following two sections focus on the discursive strategies that are employed in justifying class-related inequality. These discursive strategies operate through redefining differences between the middle class and the lower classes, as well as by insisting on the high moral standards and morally superior lifestyles of the middle class. This cultural and moral differentiation is created and maintained by 1) insisting on the democratic and classless nature of middle-class food culture and by 2) utilizing cultural stereotypes favourable to the middle class.

4.1. Reassurance of equality: Insisting on the democratic and classless nature of middle-class food culture

In the sphere of omnivorous food culture, the ideology of democratic cultural consumption (see above) influences the definitions of good taste. In the *reassurance of*

equality discourse, this appropriate democratic life-stylistic ideal is constructed and emphasized through obscuring economic inequality, through “appreciating difference”, and by depicting poverty and wealth as cultural equals (“close together rather than far apart”, see Johnston & Baumann, 2015, 161) that merely result from different choices and preferences.

One news article (A1) discusses the recent cultural shift from exclusive to democratic through expert commentary:

[On the other hand] many luxury items seem to be available to many. A seven-euro loaf of organic rye bread can be purchased by nearly anyone. A dinner in a top restaurant can be achieved by saving some money. By saving money for a decade, one can, for instance, purchase an expensive design dining table.³

What kind of consumers make up these groups of many or nearly anyone who are affected by a new and equal food culture? In practice, if a person needs to save money for a decade to purchase a dining table, and another person needs to save for three months for the same table, they can hardly be called equal. Privileged understandings are often presented as normal or “classless” in food talk – even though structural inequality makes distinctive eating remarkably difficult for marginalized groups (see Johnston et al., 2011, p. 296). Instead of ideologically reinforcing the differences between *us* and *them*, the reassurance of equality discourse naturalises economic differences by characterizing poverty and wealthiness as culturally equal states of being, and thus defining economic privilege meaningless, as one alternative among numerous equivalent lifestyle choices.

In addition, the highlighting of equality is brought to the fore by redefining the concept of “everyday food” and by rejecting the characterization of “an elitist”. In one article (A2) a middle-class interviewee speaks of a food co-op he founded in order to secure a steady supply of “good Finnish everyday food” to his family.

The bland tasting vegetables and the ready-made, marinated meat cuts of the super market felt uninspiring, and so the family decided to opt for something better.

Defining better than normal food as merely normal food is emphasized by pointing out the commonness and relaxed habitus of the interviewee, who “takes it easy” and exhibits “neither the passion of a pioneer nor the fanaticism of a revolutionist leader”. Distinction is often reinvented under the guise of simplicity (see Paddock, 2014): Branded as simple and straightforward, good Finnish everyday food that apparently everyone can and should eat becomes simultaneously exclusive.

³ Direct quotes translated by the author of this article

Simplicity is not inherent in the food itself but a social construct, and emphasis on the simplicity of a given food enables safe navigation between two conflicting cultural strategies of elitism and pluralism (Kaplan, 2013, p. 246).

Elitism is turned down rigorously within the discourse. In one opinion piece (A3) the (alleged) elitist nature of ethical food culture is refused through moral and economic stances. Between immoral poverty and equally immoral snobbery remains a narrow space for moral action, where morality refers to know-how, interest, care, and effort:

Berries and mushrooms are free of charge. One can easily access top quality products through local food groups.

People who really care about what they eat are usually also able to prepare their food themselves.

In the food texts upholding middle-class hegemony, material expenses of ethical eating are rarely considered. In *Helsingin Sanomat*, the cost of food is obscured in the arguments relating to cost-efficiency are left ambivalent – according to the writers (of, in particular, A3 and another opinion piece (A4)), organic and local food are both more affordable, of similar cost, and more expensive than “regular” food. High cost is not, in itself, a problem, since the food is anti-elitist *in principle* and thus in a way achievable for everyone. The opinion piece writers aim to distinguish some pompous lifestyle from simply preferring high-quality produce – the wealthy elite from those who just want to spend a bit more money on food.

The discursive strategies utilized in the reassurance of equality discourse rely heavily on *redefining* collective understandings related to economic and cultural means. In this discourse, affordability, expensiveness, equality, and luxury are defined in remarkably different ways depending on the chosen viewpoint: on one hand, rye bread is described as luxurious, on the other hand a 72-euro restaurant dinner in a pop-up restaurant originated from a will to “prepare good food that people can afford” (A5). Instead of reinforcing normative, pre-existing discursive limits, this discourse shifts the limits of what can be said through symbolic redefinition. The omnivorous culture with its merging and blurring of high-brow and low-brow culture is present: luxury is anything named as such, and exclusive items are available for anyone, as long as you save enough money. The individual addressed by this discourse might be quality-conscious but not a snob, prudent but not poor.

4.2. Cultural strategies of distinction: Utilizing cultural stereotypes favourable to the middle class

In the *middle-class distinction* discourse class differences are introduced and used by employing lifestyle choices connected to class tastes, and classes are differentiated

from each other by utilizing meanings connected to classed cultures. In the data of *Helsingin Sanomat*, class difference is produced via ample examples of distinctive eating as well as by highlighting the opposite nature of different class lifestyles and stereotypical class habitus. Food culture appreciated by the middle class is in the centre of this discourse, and other tastes and lifestyles are being defined by comparing them with the middle-class norm.

In the analysed data, organic food functions as a symbol of the middle class and as a locating agent of middle-class lifestyle. In one travel article (A6) the status hierarchy of Swedish residential neighbourhoods is alluded to by referring to organic consumption:

Organic food is selling fast. This is not a surprise, since located next door is a contemporary but colourful Bo01 neighbourhood. It is home for the bohemian bourgeoisie.

In one article (A7), Michelle Obama and Judy Oreck (spouse of former US ambassador to Finland) are named as examples of a “new upper middle class that grows organic carrots and keeps bees like any other down-shifting hipster”. In a travel article on Berlin (A8), a subspecies of middle class – *hipsters* (see Cronin et al., 2014) – are connected with organic food, and after finding the “new hipster neighbourhood” it might be difficult to determine which came first, the hipster or the organic market. The appeal of ethical eating among affluent consumers is well documented (see above), and organic or local food pass as markers of middle-class lifestyle without much need for argumentation.

Middle-classness is presented in the discourse through depicting specific “life-stylistic” attributes. In one article (A9) showcasing the selection of a middle-class suburban grocery store, the status of an educated middle class is being argued by listing various lifestyle-appropriate culinary products until their exclusivity becomes “proven” through cumulation:

The fish counter offers living lobsters and oysters. There are blinis and roe: sturgeon, trout, self-smoked Arctic char.

There is an abundance of cheeses, exceeding the variety of sausages. There is organic food, local food, fair-trade on offer. Gluten-free, low-carbohydrate, additive-free.

The above-mentioned grocery store is acceptable to the educated middle class due to its diverse selection of both traditional bourgeoisie culinary pleasures as well as contemporary (authentic and ethical) high-status produce. Traditional high-brow foods are paired with authentic and cosmopolitan tastes of the omnivorous era. A broad repertoire of culinary experience has symbolic value among fractions of the middle class with high levels of cultural capital (see Cappellini et al., 2015, 1096).

In a reportage on one local kiosk (A10) class differences are made visible through subtle comparisons. The village of Långvik, where “wealth oozing from the city meets the spirited can-do countryside”, is inhabited by both local blue-collar people and middle-class cottagers. The presence of class distinction is implied by bringing up well-known class symbols, and so working-classness with its Ferrari baseball caps, Saab cars and cigarette packs is being compared with the red wine and high literature of the affluent city-dwellers. The same archetypes are divided into the sellers of their labour and the buyers of that labour:

“There seems to be something wrong with the steering wheel since our car always veers to this place”, says Westlin-Latooma and commissions, in passing, some dock repairs from Stjernberg.

In the middle-class distinction discourse, distinctions are put to good use by employing cultural stereotypes (or *topoi*) that have been repurposed as symbols of class cultures. Even though it seems that the Italian wood ovens being advertised on the kiosk’s message board coexist peacefully with a product range of meat pies and cheap beer, the article makes it clear that Långvik is populated by lower-class locals and upper-class holiday residents. In addition, the middle-class cottagers do not primarily visit the local kiosk out of necessity, but as a manifestation of their high morals and authentic taste and thus of the ideal of “reviving local cultures” typical of the ethical eating discourse.

5. AESTHETICS OF LEGITIMATE MIDDLE-CLASS FOOD

The following sections focus on the aesthetics and stylistic strategies deployed in portraying organic or local food as legitimate. As mentioned in the second section of this article, cultural legitimacy – appropriateness, goodness, cultural and symbolic worthiness – is based on understandings of good taste. In an omnivorous food culture, good taste does not necessarily refer to only high-class quality food (that is exclusive or rare), but good food is defined through more diverse and complex evaluations.

In the initial content analysis that centred on the positive framings of organic and local food, the aesthetic and evaluative categories of *authenticity* and *nostalgia* were most prominent and featured frequently in the sampling. This is why the following sections ask what kind of discursive strategies are utilized in qualifying food defined as authentic or nostalgic and how these characteristics are deemed legitimate and desirable.

5.1. Authenticity: Legitimizing traditional, hand-made, and simple food

Authenticity is broadly understood as referring to all things genuine, unadulterated, without hypocrisy, and honest (see Reisinger & Steiner, 2006). The symbolic

appeal of authenticity is grounded on its role as a tool for cultural dominance: any group that can legitimize the authenticity of its own tastes in contrast to others' can claim moral superiority (Zukin, 2010, pp. 2-3). According to Vannini and Williams (2009, p. 3), authenticity is not so much a state of being as a set of qualities that people in a particular time and place have come to agree represent an *ideal* or *exemplar*.

Authenticity is usually evaluated from outside looking in, and in food culture authenticity primarily indicates an urban appreciation of rural cuisine (Weiss, 2011, p. 75). Food journalists implore authenticity when offering particular foods as legitimate parts of the contemporary gastronomic scene. In *Helsingin Sanomat*, discursive construction of authenticity relies heavily on general buzzwords (see Smith, 2020) of the contemporary legitimate middle-class food culture. The journalistic texts tap into a pre-existing Western discursive repertoire of authentic food in educating the Finnish (middle-class) public. Here, these buzzwords and aesthetics are related to tradition, history, artisanship, and simplicity.

One way of qualifying something as authentic is to prove that the artefact or custom originates from a specific time, place, or *terroir*. Both food enthusiasts and food journalists value foods prepared and consumed in specific locations and grant less status on placeless foods that come from nowhere special or specific (Johnston & Baumann, 2015, p. 65). In one *Helsingin Sanomat* article (A11) the menu of an upscale food restaurant is reported to include "meat from the Bosgård estate", "delicacies from Malmgård" and "whitefish from the fishermen of Pellinki". Giving a name to the food or its origin functions as proof of authenticity.

Ways of preparing food that have remained the same for decades and centuries function as strong legitimizers in the news articles. Food is defined as authentic by associating it with *historical tradition*. In an article on travel in Italy (A12), contemporary fads are outshined by tradition and heritage: in the Marche territory, "the freshness of the produce is taken for granted, and organic and local food have been served for centuries before it became fashionable". In the French territory of Calvados (A13), "the tradition of making cider stretches back to the Middle Ages", and in Lyon (A14), a winery "has been making their Beaujolais Nouveau since the Renaissance era". The connection of food with historical or ethno-cultural tradition demonstrates that the authentic food has stayed true to its origins and maintained its integrity (Johnston & Baumann, 2015, p. 78), which grants the food moral and aesthetic value.

In addition to geographical specificity and historical continuity, authenticity emerges through the themes of artisanship and simplicity in the analysed material. In the upscale local food restaurant depicted above (A11), the restaurateur named "Kallio has hand-picked hundreds of litres of raspberries and wild strawberries near his father-in-law's summer house", whereas "wood sorrel, fireweed, and spruce sprouts have been gathered by Kallio's father". Authenticity becomes proven by differentiating multinational and artificial products from foods prepared *with love*, by hand, and thus appreciated by the (middle-class) community.

The evaluative polarization between *made with love* and made without love (for profit) relies on a commonplace trope where a sincere individual goes against the faceless corporate machine (see also Chen & Eriksson, 2019). In *Helsingin Sanomat*, mass production and especially markets (as well as *the market*) are met with suspicion. Products sold in markets damage unborn babies (A15) and their beverage selections are comprised – instead of genuine English cider – of carbonated watery liquid impersonating cider (A16). Even children wonder mistrustfully about the origins and production conditions of super market products in an article covering urban farming (A17). If an actor defined as profit-driven (market chains, (multi)national businesses) wants to capitalize on the favourable frame of *the hand-made*, it needs to make a lot of effort: in one article (A18), the CEO of a national liquor company insists that “only organic barley and bilberries picked from Kainuu territory are good enough” for their new organic liquor.

The philosophy of *simplicity*, “uncomplicated food” or “simple Finnish food” is a unifying element in many of the news texts. Simplicity refers often to food’s visible characteristics. When food is framed as simple, seediness is no longer ugly but a sign of sincerity and authenticity and thus desirable (Zukin, 2008, p. 727). For example, in the coffee lounge of one organic food store (A19) all “coffee cups have been collected from flea markets and received as donations” and in one restaurant (inspired by the “parochiality of French cafés”) in the Turku archipelago “dishes are served on ceramic plates that [restauranteur] Smeds has fudged together in his little foundry” (A20). The sincerity of simple aesthetics obscures the consumerist reality of the restaurant industry and symbolically transfers a café or a restaurant to something less consumerist – if not completely outside the margins of consumer-based society (“the market”) then at least in the periphery of it.

Mere simplicity requires beside it something that can be used to differentiate between “rustic in a good way” from just commonplace food. With the aid of specific discursive strategies, simple foods soar from normality to distinction, and food established as rustic can at the same time be both distinctive and “simple home cooked food” (see Paddock, 2014, p. 37). The mix of familiarity and extraordinariness is clearly present in the news texts of *Helsingin Sanomat*. Mere “everyday food” is held in high esteem, even though it is rarely good enough as such in the eyes of restauranteurs or home cooks. In one article (A21) covering the life of a food blogger, simple and honest food – real butter, real cream, fish, and potatoes – needs by its side examples of exotic and trendy food, including organic food, hand-made caramel ice cream, gin tonic sorbet, and lamb lollipops. A commentary on Finnish eating habits by a home cooking expert added to the article leaves little room for misunderstanding the difference between legitimate simple food and just simple food:

I have noticed too distinct cultures. Others are into organic and local food, others could not care less what is on their plate, as long as it is food.

According to Johnston and Baumann, simplicity is brought up even when the food itself seems rather complicated (2015, p. 68). In the kitchen of a traditional restaurant in Lyon (A14) “they have not skimmed on the butter” and the food “tastes home-spun, as it should, in a bouchon”. The journalist describing the food – “Quenelle, that is, a palm-sized ball made of Northern pike in béchamel-sauce is steaming in the casserole” and “the menu is topped by caramel ice with raspberry coulis” – as home-spun demonstrates how simplicity can be a flexible concept in connection with food.

5.2. Nostalgia: Middle-class performances of rural escape

Differing from the buzzword-driven authenticity, nostalgia relies on comprehensive cultural narratives that build on class-based identifications. Another significant difference between authenticity and nostalgia in the analysed texts concerns the existence of a given object or phenomenon. Portraying something as authentic stresses the continuance of tradition and the preservation of “the natural” whereas the nostalgic point of view centres on the themes of the lost purity of nature and the irretrievable past. *The pastoral*, meaning nostalgic and idealized longing for the innocence and happiness of a lost place, is utilized in the framings of *Helsingin Sanomat* (see Santesso, 2006, pp. 27–40).

Nostalgia for the untainted countryside is a common reaction to the hectic modern life. The return to nature or to the “peasant’s way of life” simmers in the cultural imagination of many nations. According to Banet-Weiser, nostalgia often becomes a normative trope in political discourse as a way to mask anxiety about change. Nostalgia represents a longing for a time (which never really existed) when it was simpler to decipher a constantly changing world (2012, p. 128).

According to Mikulak (2013), the western culture has a long tradition of “the rural escape”. This pastoral tradition has valued a cultivated, rural, and peaceful “middle landscape” that situates between the violent and uncertain wilderness and the complex modern civilization (p. 98). One article (A20) relies on a portrayal of the archipelago as a place for ascetic but romantic living that inhabits the idyllic space between nature and the city, and guests of a rustic but comfortable inn can almost see how “the nature is slowly reclaiming the island”.

The joys of the countryside often function as counterbalance for the urban life. In an article on the hunting activities of an opera singer (A22), hunting as gentlemanly pastoral pursuit acts as a way to connect with nature and to be able to do something with one’s own hands in the midst of a busy work and home life. The country life feels tempting in our culture especially when the countryside is perceived as a playground for “the gentry” and the actual farm labour is erased from the equation (Mikulak, 2013, p. 105). The ethical discourse is shaped by nostalgia for preindustrial food production methods and by images of rural utopias liberated from the risks of global food production systems. Food practices are reframed as pleasurable and moral

choices (and as “rediscovering traditional food”) rather than as laborious domestic drudgery (Phillipov, 2016, p. 112).

In addition to hobbies, the rural escape is connected to travel and luxurious pampering. In an article on travelling in Estonia (A23), even the middle-class Finn gets to have a taste of the high-class life of country elegance:

During most of my travels I head to the countryside, to ride horses on the island of Muhu. While there, we lodge in taverns where the hostesses cook homely fare for us. When one has been riding cross-country in the hazelnut groves with a sea breeze from dusk till dawn, food truly tastes good.

In the analysed texts, the appeal of pastoral nostalgia seems to be in the social hierarchies of the good old times, through which privileged tourists can almost inch towards the idle gentry class and thus detach themselves from the burdens of everyday life.

Romanticizing the past and the country life often comes with dubious aspects as certain issues fall outside the limits of discourse. The cognitive dissonance between the imagined landscapes of pastoralism and the actual landscapes of capitalist agriculture is maintained by sentimental and selectively nostalgic versions of country life (Mikulak, 2013, p. 100 and 115). The social arrangements of ownership and labour tend to disappear behind nature. Issues of social inequity, patriarchy, and class are disregarded in the appeal to values (purity, naturalness) conveniently outside of history (p. 99).

One contemporary American author often critiqued by scholars (e.g. Lynch & Giles, 2013; Zimmerman, 2015) is Michael Pollan, whose demands of a shift to clean and pure food are regarded as having a narrow and conventional view on the realities of food production and consumption. In one article (A25), the reporter ends up agreeing with Pollan on the excellency of pure and self-grown food:

Pollan prepares a meal straight from nature: by cultivating, hunting, fishing, and gathering. He even dries salt from the sea and makes yeast by himself!

I open my fridge: self-picked strawberries and bilberries, vegetables from our own land, moose from Kymenlaakso, and wild fish from the Gulf of Finland. Once again, I can feel pleased that many of the things lost in the modern world are, for us, still possible and real every day.

Both the “us Americans” addressed by Pollan and the “us” addressed in the article leave a significant number of consumers on the outside of both the preferred lifestyle and a position of an active subject in this discourse. In the article, culinary self-sufficiency is connected with sustainability and earthiness as opposed to the modern world. Amidst the choices – and necessities – of food, the possibilities and

realities of the everyday are determined by way of capital and economic resources. The natural and the authentic are often intertwined with old distinctions and with historically masculinized, whitened and middle-classed performances of taste preference (Zimmerman, 2015, p. 46). Food journalism, too, can either critique existing and unequal ways of food production or work within their discriminatory neoliberal tenets (Phillipov, 2016, p. 112).

6. CONCLUSIONS: DEPOLITICING FOOD THROUGH FOOD MEDIA

The aim of this analysis has been to map the ways in which good food and worthy food culture are understood in Finnish mainstream journalism. In *Helsingin Sanomat*, the legitimation of food culture works through utilizing middle-class tastes, values and aesthetics, and class is made both visible and invisible depending on the current strategy: middle-classness is ingrained in food journalism through blurring the economic or cultural privilege of the middle class and at the same time reproducing the superior morality of middle-class values (*reassurance of equality* discourse), through highlighting the boundaries and differences between the middle class and others (*cultural strategies of distinction* discourse), and through implanting new, privileged middle-class aesthetics as the stylistic attributes which to aspire toward (discourses of *authenticity* and *nostalgia*).

In the journalistic discursive practices of *Helsingin Sanomat*, culinary distinction is maintained, among other things, by tapping into both the pleasure and the morality of ethical middle-class food practices. According to Johnston and Baumann (2015, p. 113), the contemporary field of ethical consumption is characterized by a tension between ideologies of consumerism (that maximize individual choice and pleasure) and citizenship (that emphasize responsibility to a larger social and ecological collective). The aspect of citizenship and social or ecological responsibility is largely absent from the discourses introduced in this paper, and the “morality of it” seems to refer to middle-class agency as (at its best) salvaging traditional foods from being forgotten to (at its worst) utilizing a moral stand point in order to differentiate oneself from the immoral lower classes. As Lynch and Giles (2013, p. 489) point out, food is often presented as providing opportunity for moral action by means of constructing oneself and others as good or bad human beings, or as the “right” and “wrong” sorts of people.

The ideological power of middle-class evaluations in *Helsingin Sanomat* in particular and food media in general come from the seemingly apolitical nature of its subject: stories on food travel, restaurants or food co-ops are understood as being as far away as possible from the “hard” news and serious subjects of business or politics, and the politics relating to inequality, hunger, global warming, unethical practices, or food security are left mainly unreported. The legitimating discursive strategies operate by depoliticizing food in the media – by concealing the privileges connected with practices and values and by defining good food as being (only) a matter of choice, identity,

lifestyle, and personal taste. Cultural power in a concealed and apolitical form is particularly influential, and that is why food journalism and other food media need to be taken seriously in studying mediated culture. Despite the depoliticizing strategies of the hegemonic ethical discourse, food is a question of politics – carrying with it complex relationships of power and privilege.

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