Food from an intercultural perspective
Tastes, identities, languages

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1. WE ARE WHAT WE EAT: TASTE AND SOCIO-CULTURAL IDENTITY

"Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man you are". How many times have we heard these words? Introduced by gastronome Brillat-Savarin in his well-known *Physiology of Taste* (1825), this aphorism has been increasingly mentioned not only in scholarly books, but also in a variety of messages circulating within social networks, online forums, weblogs, and the mass media. But what does it mean? How can food define our identity? In the following paragraphs we will attempt to answer these questions, hence pointing out the inter-cultural characterisation of food and taste.

1.1. BEYOND FOOD PROPERTIES: CULTURES AND PERCEPTIONS OF EDIBILITY

In China, Thailand and many Asian countries people largely consume larvae, locusts, and other insects. In Peru it is common to eat hamster's and llama's meat. In Africa and Australia some tribes cook and eat snakes. By contrast, these same habits would probably sound odd, or at least unfamiliar, to Europeans

or North Americans. Why? Is there anything in the organic composition of insects, hamsters, snakes or other foods that can explain such preferences and taboos? Unquestionably, there are some substances that are biologically unsuited to be eaten by human beings, but that's not the case of these foods: we are not talking of any poisonous or indigestible items. In this sense, the case of insects is emblematic: their exoskeleton is principally made of chitin, a substance whose digestibility by humans has been commonly questioned and on some occasions also denied. However, even if confirmed, such a fact could not explain, alone, why Europeans and North Americans do not eat insects, while they largely consume other foods rich in chitin such as crabs, lobsters, shrimps and other crustaceans by removing their shell or even eating it (when sufficiently soft). Furthermore, the problem of chitin could be easily solved by eating insects in their larval form, before their body is shed by the external skeleton. Definitely, the reason of the European and North American reluctance to eat insects cannot be explained in purely material terms.

Fig. 1. Tray with bowls of food, including fried insects, used in Lao cuisine. Traditionally prepared by the families going to the temple, this meal is generally shared with the Buddhist monks there (©Basile Morin 2018).

Exactly as insects, many of the items that we do not eat are substances that are perfectly edible from a biological point of view. But yet we do not consume them. This means that, although human beings eat, first of all, to survive, in the collective sphere food gains meanings that go beyond its basic function and affect our perceptions of edibility.

1.2. HOW TO DISTINGUISH EDIBLE FROM INEDIBLE SUBSTANCES: A MATERIALISTIC OR CULTURAL QUESTION?

The process of distinction between edible and non-edible products can be explained in different ways. From a materialistic point of view, the substances selected as food seem to have a more favourable balance of practical benefits over costs (either in terms of efforts needed to produce them or effects that they have on environmental aspects) than other substances, which, having cheaper and more nutritious substitutes, tend to be discarded. This would explain, for instance, why the most carnivorous cuisines are generally associated with relatively low population densities and lands not suitable for agriculture, while the most herbivorous cuisines are adopted by dense populations whose habitat and food production technologies make livestock likely to reduce the amount of proteins and calories available for humans. In this perspective, all food taboos and prescriptions can be explained in terms of an "ecological advantage" based on rational processes of adaptation, even though people do not generally rationalise such a process.

However, it must be said that not always groups sharing the same ecological conditions also share the same food preferences or taboos: let us consider, for instance, the increasing number of people opting for vegetarianism or veganism not because of the material conditions of their habitat or food production technologies, but rather for ethical reasons (see chapter "The ethics of eating"). In fact, in order to be "good to eat", substances should be first of all "good to think", that is to say, they must nourish people's collective mind (i.e. their system of values, beliefs, and customs) to be considered suitable for their stomach. Our biological need for nourishment is always inserted in a system of values, and, either according to a totemic (as in animistic religions), a sacrificial (as in ancient history), a hygienic-rationalist (as in contemporary Western dietetics) or an aesthetic (as in gastronomy) logic, all cultures develop classification systems according to which all products with nutritional qualities are divided into two categories: edible and inedible. Definitely, such choices cannot be explained solely in material or ecological terms, but require to take into consideration social and cultural factors.

1.3. BEYOND PHYSIOLOGY: TASTE AS A SOCIOCULTURAL FACT

When dealing with food preferences, it is impossible not to make reference to another crucial concept: *taste*. If we look for the word "taste" in the dictionary, we will find its definition in terms of the "special sense that perceives and distinguishes the qualities and flavours of a dissolved substance in the mouth". In this sense, taste is conceived as a bodily sensation, which varies from person to person. In fact, we all have specific receptor cells, called taste buds, which are located around the so-called *papillae* that can be found on the upper surface of our tongue, soft palate, upper oesophagus, cheeks and epiglottis. Such receptors (which can vary in number

and form from person to person) allow us to perceive the sapid molecules present in food or any other item introduced into our mouth, thus highlighting the individual character of taste.

But the gustatory experience does not end there. First of all, it is essential to note that taste does not only consist in perceiving, but also in distinguishing the qualities and flavours of the substances dissolved in our mouth. In order to do so, we need to share some common categories: despite the very vast range of sapid molecules present in food, in fact, we currently refer to five basic categories (salty, sweet, bitter, acid and, only in the last decades, **umami**) to distinguish and describe the sensations perceived while tasting specific foods. In ancient times, by contrast, more varied classifications were used: while Plato distinguished bitter, sweet, salty, sour, astringent, and pungent, for instance, Aristotle placed sweet and bitter on opposite ends of the spectrum of flavours, with salty, pungent, harsh, astringent, and acidic in between. And even more complex typologies have been used along history.

Fig. 2. A screenshot from the movie Ratatouille.
While Remy, a young rat with highly developed senses of taste who dreams of becoming a chef, tastes some cheese and a strawberry, variable coloured forms and lines appear on the screen to synaesthetically represent his sensory perceptions (©Walt Disney Pictures / Pixar Animation Studios 2007).

Things are made even more complex by the **synaesthetic** characterisation of taste, which involves various senses at the same time: in fact, we do not perceive food exclusively by the sense of taste, but also through the sight (which has become very important in contemporary gastronomy, where special attention is devoted to the visual presentation of food), smell (which completes and enhances the elemental capacity of taste, also allowing us to recognise inedible substances such as rotten foods even before introducing them into our mouth), touch (which allows perceiving the texture and temperature of foods), and hearing (which can affect our perception of food, especially in relation to texture). Provided such a variety of sensations, social and cultural belonging are fundamental to the way in which gustative sensitivity develops and is able to classify

and describe flavours. It is in this sense that taste can be conceived as a real means of knowledge, as well as a way to come into contact with other people.

2. NOT ONLY WHAT WE EAT: COOKING TECHNIQUES, TABLE MANNERS, AND COMMENSALITY

We have seen that culture plays a crucial role in the food domain, since it determines our perceptions of edibility and taste. But it's not all about what we eat and how we perceive it. It is also about how we cook food (*cooking techniques*): if some practices, such as roasting or boiling, are very common across the world, others, such as "Hāngi" (i.e. a traditional Maori method of cooking food using heated rocks buried in a pit oven) or "Baghaar" (i.e. a technique used in Pakistani and Indian cuisine consisting in frying spices and then using the oil to flavour dishes), are unique to specific countries, regions or cultures.

Fig. 3. A group of men around a Hāngi at Te Whaiti.
Photograph taken by Albert Percy Godber in October 1930 (©Godber Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library).

And it is also about how we eat food (i.e. by using our hands, pieces of cutlery, chopsticks, or any other utensil), as well as about the rules (i.e. speaking or keeping silent, making or not making noise while eating, minutely masticating foods in the mouth or directly swallowing them, etc.) we have to respect while eating (**table manners**). Finally, it is also about the symbolic space characterising the eating experience (**commensality**), with some people conceiving the meal as a private, al-

most individual experience and other people rather emphasising sharing and interchanging.

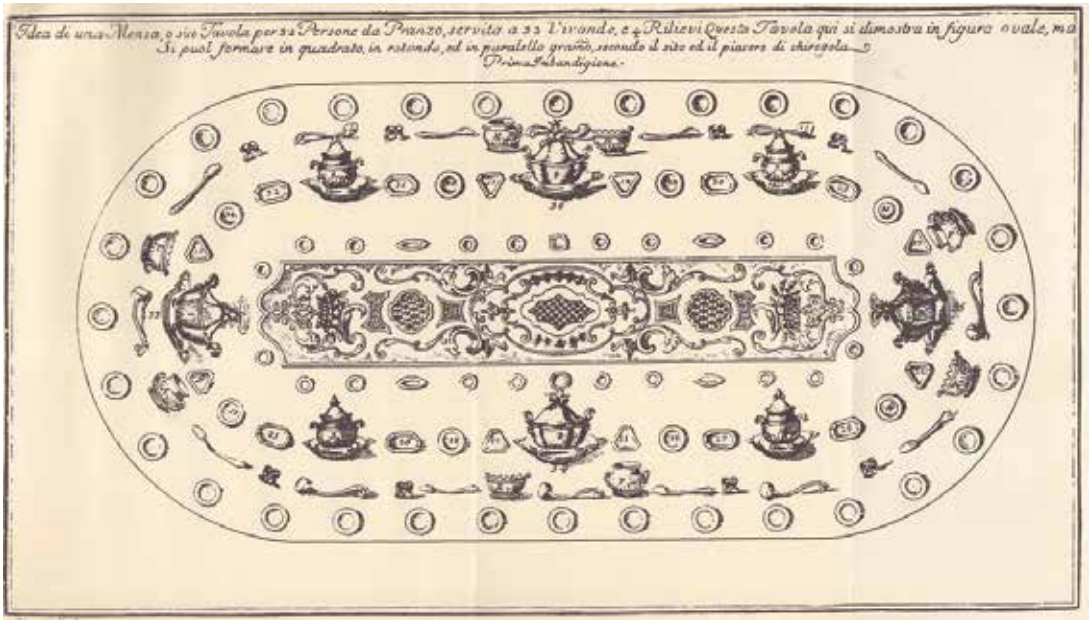

Fig. 4. An illustration from the ancient book Il cuoco galante by Vincenzo Corrado giving instructions for setting a table for 32 diners (©Vincenzo Corrado 1773).

All these aspects, which are generally referred to as **food-ways**, are minutely ruled in every culture, even in the most familiar and informal meal: a number of class, gender, economic, social and cultural aspects intervene on such dynamics, and it would be very difficult, or in any case extremely artificial, to apply the same set of rules inherent in a certain culture to another one.

3. FOOD, LANGUAGE, AND COMMUNICATION

The cultural and symbolic characterisation of the elements considered so far makes it possible to compare food to language: exactly as language, in fact, food (in all its aspects) allows us to express our values, beliefs, morals, etc. – in other words, our "cultural identity". Furthermore, it is a powerful means of communication with other people, and in this sense represents perhaps the most immediate way through which we can come into contact with other cultures.

More specifically, two major attitudes towards other "food languages" can be identified: on the one hand, human beings seem to suffer from a biological need for food variety, that is to say, an omnivorousness that drives us to adapt to environmental changes and explore a multitude of new foods and diets (**neophilia**); on the other hand, we also fear the risks associated with new foods and new food sources (**neophobia**), thus opting for prudence and resistance to change. The tension between these two opposite poles gives origin to the "**omnivore's dilemma**": humans, as omnivores, seek and explore new potential

foods, but remain wary of them until these are proven safe (in a material, but also symbolic sense, as we discussed in the previous paragraphs).

Not only personal, but also historical, social and cultural aspects make people more likely to adopt either a neophilic or a neophobic attitude towards new food systems or languages. In the past, for instance, the fear for the new seemed to prevail, as effectively exemplified by the 15th and 16th century European explorers and conquerors' approach to the gastronomic universe of the so-called "New World", who found it hard to theoretically 'classify' their new experiences, and so "filtered" them through their own criteria and habits. In the anonymous *Relatione d'alcune cose della Nuova Spagna, & della gran città di Temistitan Messicò. Fatta per un gentil'huomo del Signor Fernando Cortese* (1556), for example, *maize* is presented as "a grain like a chickpea" that sows cobs "like panic-grass", while *tortillas* are described as a "kind of bread", and turkey is defined as a "big chicken like a peacock", thus persistently referring to the Mediterranean culinary tradition with which its author was familiar. Moreover, even from the practical point of view the acceptance of these new foods in the European context remained for a long time absolutely marginal, as proved by the case of potatoes: easily accepted in regions characterised by a soil ill-fitted for the cultivation of wheat or rye, the American tuber was mostly rejected or submitted to treatments aiming at integrating it into the process of bread making in France, where bread represented an unavoidable element of people's life, both on the material side (as it was the main ingredient of soups and other dishes, prevailing on meats and cold cuts) and the symbolic dimension (with particular reference to Christianity). It was only at a later stage that it was introduced as a new *cultivar* in those regions and increasingly adopted in cooking.

Things have evidently changed in today's world, where a number of migratory flows, travels and worldwide communication systems have made the encounters among different food cultures become increasingly evident and consistent, affecting (much faster than in the past) the existing culinary traditions and rapidly becoming part of them. But an easier contact does not necessarily imply acceptance or a better understanding, nor it automatically increases a neophilic attitude, as we will consider in details in the following paragraph.

4. CONTEMPORARY FOODWAYS BETWEEN GLOBALIZATION AND LOCALISATION

Whether eagerly exalted or strongly criticised, **globalization** is a factual characteristic of the contemporary world: the development of new technologies of communication and the advances in transportation have caused a process of international integration and connection, enhancing the interchange and interdependence of products and economic activities, and also of world views, ideas and other aspects of culture. These process-

es have increasingly affected also food, causing the crossing and overlapping of different **foodways**. Migrations, travels, and communications incessantly expose local food systems to global exchange. Of course, this is not a totally new thing: food exchanges and displacements have always existed, and in no other area have the interactions between the global exchange and local cultural practices been as evident as in food cultures. However, the **globalization** of markets has incredibly increased such exchanges and interactions, with contrasting effects as regards to the cultural dimension of food.

On the one hand, the greater availability and diversity of food choices made possible by globalized markets have enhanced a neophilic attitude toward exotic foods, broadening both culinary horizons and intercultural tolerance. Thus "**ethnic food**" has become a fundamental presence in Western food cultures: restaurants offering exotic food experiences are increasing in number, and in many city markets local products are increasingly complemented with spices, vegetables and other foods required for the preparation of ethnic dishes. This same phenomenon, furthermore, has progressively become popular on a wider scale, affecting large distribution chains: in North America and Europe, for example, recent decades have seen the increase of foreign foods on supermarket shelves, sometimes in sections specifically devoted to **ethnic food** (e.g. soy noodles, Mexican tortillas, chili sauce, spring rolls, or sushi), and sometimes even next to local and more common products (e.g. basmati rice, coconut milk, or exotic fruits). Moreover, a number of experiments in the field of the so-called "**fusion cuisine**" have fostered hybridization by successfully combining elements of different culinary traditions (such as in the case of the famous Tex-Mex cuisine, which is known worldwide for tastily mixing South-western United States and Mexican cuisines; or of the various adaptations of Japanese sushi that have arisen in the last decades, giving origin to hybrid plates such as the popular Peruvian-Japanese *maki acevichado*[1]).

Fig. 5. Figure 5. The maki acevichado served at Costanera 700 in Lima, Peru (©Simona Stano 2019).

1 The so-called maki acevichado combines the Japanese food *par excellence*—that is, sushi—with the most representative Peruvian food—that is, *ceviche*. Both of them are characterised by a great versatility, which has certainly favoured the

On the other hand, **globalization** has also resulted in the domestication of other culinary traditions, which have had to adapt to local taste and habits. As the Chinese cuisine (which has been described as one of the most remarkable examples of the **globalization** of food) became popular in the US, for instance, Chinese restaurants' owners had to choose between emphasising or playing down their exoticism. In most cases the second option prevailed, originating a process of domestication resulting in the creation of new dishes, such as the famous *chop suey* or the so-called "fortune cookies", which are in fact American-Chinese invented foods. The same applies to *kebab*, *falafel* and other foods of the Levantine cuisine sold in Western Europe, which have almost totally lost their ethnic characterisation and are nowadays conceived as "street" or "fast" foods by most people.

Another risk commonly associated with **globalization** is the homologation or homogenization of taste: critics of **globalization** denounce the reduction (and almost disappearance) of distinctive food tastes, cultures, and techniques, which have been overwhelmed by global products. This is the so-called process of "**McDonaldization**": everything in the food industry (and, at a more general level, in contemporary society) has been homogenized, from the type of food offered to its presentation and portion sizes, from the costs to the layout of the restaurants, etc. However, McDonald's itself has increasingly promoted a process of adaptation to local **foodways** (e.g. serving sushi in Japan, falafel sandwiches in Egypt, etc.), thus opting for "**glocal**" solutions. In several cases, then, the perceived danger of homologation deriving from **globalization** has resulted in the enhancement of local realities: specific schemes and labels for geographical indications and traditional specialties labels have been adopted internationally to protect the names of specific products and promote their unique characteristics, as linked to their origin and traditional know-how. And various forms of **locavorism** (such as the so-called "Zero Km phenomenon" in Italy, or the substantial preference for local farmers' markets and locally produced food in Lithuania, Bulgaria and many other countries) have arisen, inviting people to consume exclusively locally produced food, although with some criticisms.

All these elements, together with the contrasting effects in terms of **food security** and **safety**, emphasise the complexity of **globalization** and its effects in the food domain. From the point of view of cultural dynamics, the most important aspect to be considered, as the described examples show, is that if on the one hand **globalization** has broken down some cultural differences, on the other hand it has also activated processes of diversification and integration that tend to redefine the uses and meanings of food products and techniques.

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origin of this "fusioned food", itself including a number of varieties and recipes.

5. FOOD AS CULTURAL HERITAGE

Provided the cultural characterisation of **foodways** analysed so far, it is not surprising that the production, preparation, consumption and sharing of food has long been considered a form of **cultural heritage**. Not only food is made of substances that form part of the so-called "natural heritage" and requires tools that can be ascribed to the "tangible heritage", but, even most importantly, food rituals, culinary techniques, dietary regimes, and many other aspects of **foodways** represent forms of "intangible heritage".

The UNESCO List of Intangible **Cultural Heritage**, for instance, includes:

- The "Gastronomic meal of the French" (since 2010), conceived as a customary social practice based on conviviality, the pleasure of taste (as reflected in the setting of the table, the attention devoted to the visual composition of the plate, the structure of the meal – consisting of an aperitif, four courses and finally liqueurs –, and the pairing of food and wine) and the balance between human beings and the products of nature;
- The "Traditional Mexican Cuisine" (since 2010), defined as a cultural model encompassing farming, ritual practices, traditional culinary techniques, ancestral community customs and manners;
- The "Mediterranean Diet" (since 2013), described as a set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols and traditions concerning crops, harvesting, fishing, animal husbandry, conservation, processing, cooking, and particularly the sharing and consumption of food characterising the Mediterranean area;
- The Japanese "washoku" (since 2013), intended as a sociocultural practice based on a set of skills, knowledge and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation and consumption of food, and especially associated with an essential spirit of respect for nature;
- The "Turkish Coffee" (since 2013), and especially the rich communal traditional culture surrounding its preparation and brewing techniques;
- "Oshi Palav" (since 2016), the traditional Tajiki meal and its social and cultural contexts.

As it can be easily noticed, the idea of "tradition" plays a crucial role in the definition of these practices and habits. But what is exactly a tradition? If we look at the dictionary, it is defined as "an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behaviour (such as a religious practice or a social custom)". This definition tells us that cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions plays a crucial role in this sense, but does not clarifies how much time is required before one can properly speak of a tradition. In fact, most traditions that appear or claim

to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes even fictitious. We should therefore more properly talk of "invented traditions", intended as both traditions actually constructed *a posteriori* and formally instituted, and traditions emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief period but establishing themselves with great rapidity. This does not mean that there are traditions that are more "valid" or "genuine" than others, but simply that traditions (in the food domain as well as in general terms) cannot and should not be conceived as permanent essential qualities of specific physical places or people, but rather as historical and cultural outcomes of complex continuous processes of **hybridization** with other cultures (and tastes).

FOCUS 1

Edible insects: "the food of the future"?

Fig. 6. Recorded number of edible insect species. (©FAO 2013; source: Centre for Geo Information, Wageningen University, based on data compiled by Jongema, 2012).

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), around 2000 edible insect species supplement the diets of approximately 2 billion people, especially in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Conversely, it is only recently that entomophagy (i.e. the consumption of insects by human beings) has acquired considerable visibility in Western countries, mainly as a response to the increasing concern of **food security** and sustainability.

By 2030, in fact, it is expected that over 9 billion people will need to be fed, along with the billions of animals raised annually for food and as pets. Insects have been acclaimed as "the food of the future" because they can be found everywhere and reproduce quickly, thus easily allowing both gathering and farming. Furthermore, they have high **feed conversion rates** (i.e. they can convert 2 kg of feed into 1 kg of insect mass, while cows, for instance, require 8 kg of feed to produce 1 kg of body weight gain) and a low **environmental footprint** (i.e. reduction of greenhouse gases, water consumption and land-dependence; transformation of bio-waste, such as food and human waste, compost and animal slurry, into high-quality protein that can be used for feeding animals; etc.). Finally, they are nutritious, with high-quality protein, fat and mineral contents that are comparable with meat and fish. And according to current research, it seems that insects may pose less risk of transmitting infections to humans, livestock and wildlife in comparison with mammals and birds.
However, further research is required on the potential of insect allergies for humans, as well as on sanitation procedures ensuring **food safety**, especially on an industrial scale. Other crucial issues for investigation and development include maintaining genetic diversity to avoid colony collapse in insect farming, protecting wild insect populations from the introduction of alien and invasive species and establishing appropriate legislations regulating insects as food and feed at the international level.
Furthermore, in order to promote consumers' acceptance, new ways of integrating insects into human diets should be developed. In fact, insects can be eaten whole or ground into powder, which allows incorporating into other foods: if pioneering companies such as *Hotlix* in the US, *Jimini's* in France, or *Bush Grub* in the UK certainly share the merit of having successfully introduced crickets, mealworms and other bugs into the snack market, the insect sale has evidently improved after the appearance of start-ups and other business operators offering processed bug foods such as biscuits (*Bitty Food* in the US; *Micronutris* in France), chips (*Six Foods* in the US), meatballs (*Damhert* in Belgium), burgers (*Essento* in Switzerland), bread (*Fazer Bakery* in Finland), pasta (*Aldento* in Belgium, the Italian-managed *Bugsolutely* in Thailand), sauces (*One Hope Kitchen* in Canada) and energy bars (*Exo Protein*, *Lithic* and *Chapul* in the US; *GetSharp* in France; *Crobar*, *Eat Grub*, *Zoic bar* and *Bodhi* in the UK; *Sens bar* in the Czech Republic). Thanks to the possibility of grinding bugs into power and hence use them to prepare a variety of foods, these products and brands have increasingly contributed to introduce some insect species, such as grasshoppers and crickets (*Orthoptera*), beetles (*Coleoptera*) and yellow mealworms (*Tenebrio molitor*), into Western diets by adapting them to

local tastes and culinary traditions. But it is not only about products: in order to successfully open the way to their insect-based foods, innovative designs and appealing campaigns mainly addressed to young foodies in search of novelties and athletic customers looking for healthy and nutritious food have been adopted, thus responding to another crucial issue highlighted by the Technical Expert Consultation on Assessing the Potential of Insects as Food and Feed in Assuring Food Security, held in Rome on 23—25 January 2012, that is, the need to improve communication and consumers' awareness on entomophagy.

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON EDIBLE INSECTS?

Even though most insects are harvested in the wild, some data are available on the species that are mostly consumed worldwide. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization, the most commonly edible insects are beetles (Coleoptera, 31 %) and caterpillars (Lepidoptera, 18%), followed by bees, wasps and ants (Hymenoptera, 14%). Then we have grasshoppers, locusts and crickets (Orthoptera, 13%)—which are expected to become increasingly common, since they represent a large part of the the growing Western or Western-oriented insect market—, cicadas, leaf and plant hoppers, scale insects and true bugs (Hemiptera, 10%), termites (Isoptera, 3%), dragonflies (Odonata, 3%), flies (Diptera, 2%), and other species (5%).

Further readings:

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