

# Introduction

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Food is one of the identifying elements of culture, a driving force behind the international economy, and one of the fundamental communal aspects around which forms of identity and socialization are constructed. Food talks to us about what we are and what we want to be, how we relate to others and how we see our place in the world. Not only does food talk about us and about the society we live in, but above all we talk about food, a lot. Food and wine programmes are ever present on TV all over the world, blogs about food are becoming more and more popular, guides and recipe books climb the best seller lists, every day there are more cooking utensils and appliances available, we eat out more often than ever, and we continue to show off our culinary skills. An then we go on diets, we discuss typical cuisine, we are bombarded with advertising for dishes, ingredients and drinks; marketing in the agribusiness sector has become a branch on its own, not to mention the problems of the distribution of food, sustainability etc.

All this has the effect of increasing the attention focussed on food, and consequently the growing interest in food then increases the media output dedicated to it. It is *gastromania*, the mania for gastronomy in all its forms, and we are all more or less directly involved. However, although a lot of scientific and teaching materials about nutrition exist, there are not many, especially for secondary school students, aimed at studying the culture and communication of taste, not understood simply as information about eating well, but as an awareness of the social importance and value of nutrition – nutrition as a means of expression, a mirror and at the same time a reflection of society.

It was the realization that this was lacking that led to the creation of CUCOTA (Culture and Communication of Taste), a three year project financed by Erasmus<sup>1</sup>. Through a network of European partnerships, made up of secondary schools specializing in food

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<sup>1</sup> More specifically, it is an Erasmus+, Strategic Partnership, Key Action 201 project, which began in July 2018.

and wine, universities and a local action group<sup>2</sup>, this project has sought to put in place a series of instruments (this manual, the glossary and the project's website - [www.cucota.eu](http://www.cucota.eu)), primarily aimed at students at high schools specializing in food and wine, who will be professionals in this sector in the future, but also for those who are simply curious and want to find out more about the language of food. The objectives of the project were to promote the idea of culture and communication of taste, and new ways of doing research into food and wine, as well as international cooperation and relations between different systems and levels of education.

The research methodology that was used to look into the issues of and about food was semiotics, a discipline that studies the phenomena and processes through which sense is produced and circulates in society, regardless of whether those who produce this sense have an intention to communicate it. Semiotics analyses texts, not only in the traditional sense (texts as literary works) but also cultural products that have similar formal characteristics to texts understood in the traditional way (spaces can be considered as texts, as can practices, objects etc.). The theoretical assumption is that cultural products which are extremely different from one another can have similar structural characteristics. For example, a novel is a text with well-defined borders that uses a series of meaningful elements to express meanings, and the same can be said for an advertisement, a restaurant, and why not, a cooking utensil. For this reason, in this manual you can read about advertising and diets, ethics and cinema, packaging and interculturalism, without distinction. These cultural phenomena, as will become clear, contain meanings that are much deeper than they may appear at first sight, products and processes that talk about society and its organization, values and cultural identity.

The manual then deals with the culture of food and wine from a point of view that is completely new compared with traditional school curricula, and looks at important and very widespread phenomena, which are marginalized in traditional courses of study. The idea is to offer tools for analysis and design, theoretical presentations and case studies, using a structured interdisciplinary method for teaching key skills, based on the current reality of society, which can stimulate curiosity, projects, a critical spirit and debate. This is why all the partners collaborated in writing the various chapters, and the students and teachers of the schools actively contributed.

From this point of view, professional schools specializing in the food and wine sector need to find a new forum in which they do not simply repeat the same old formulas at every hour and for

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<sup>2</sup> The CUCOTA partnership is made up of three high schools specializing in the food and wine sector (Vincenzo Florio State Professional Institute for Food and Wine and Hotel Services, Trapani – leader of the project –, Sofia Secondary School of Bread Making and Confectionery, Kaunas Food Industry and Trade Training Centre), three universities (the University of Palermo, the New Bulgarian University, Kaunas University of Technology) and a local action group (GAL Elimos).

every occasion, but instead offer themselves as cultural hubs, and return to "telling the story" of food. Today, more than ever, it is essential to return to the educational and training values of food, its contents, its knowledge, the historical, legal and ethno-anthropological aspects that relate to it, the social, ethical, political, philosophical and ritualistic dimension that food brings to mind, overcoming cultural and discriminatory barriers and rediscovering the psychophysical balance between mind and body.

For this reason, it is necessary not only to teach students to recognize the contents and the objects of the experience, the food itself, through the senses, but also to appreciate gastronomy through the smells, aromas and flavours of their own experience, to recognize the multicultural and multi-ethnic influences of migrating populations and preserve them from globalization. The project therefore focusses on the necessity to know and interpret the gastronomic sciences in a holistic way, because educating people about food means knowing how to tell the story of gastronomy, ingredients and the land.

From this point of view, the direction of the course of action/research of the project is clearly towards a rethinking of the curricula of the professional food and wine schools, with an inclination towards semiotic/communicative aspects.

The approach adopted by the project has had repercussions in the world of research, allowing an in-depth study into the field of the semiotics of taste, and more in general a development of studies in the area of food and wine, by introducing a little known method of analysis and focussing on areas of intervention that are traditionally not dealt with very often.

The language used in the book is simple and accessible and the chapters contain examples taken from everyday experience. The technical terms have been highlighted. They refer back to a glossary where they are illustrated in a few lines with practical examples. Every chapter contains focus points for further study and brief charts that use specific examples to illustrate particularly important cases, which are relevant in relation to the main theme of the chapter.