13 Figurations of Feasting on Fermented Food in Four Remote Regions of Switzerland

With Hope, for Health, at Home

Elisabeth Hsu

Preamble

In the opening scene to his monograph *The Pasteurization of France,* Bruno Latour (1988) presents us with the military "genius" of the Russian general Kutuzov who won the battle in Tarutino over the *Grande Armée* led by Napoleon in 1812 (ibid.: 3). In other words, a military metaphor underlay medical success in the 19th century, and the military target of combating microbes quickly became the predominant metaphor for the biomedical control of acute infectious disease. The 21st century, by contrast, is riddled by chronic conditions (Manderson and Smith-Morris 2010; Fainzang and Haxaire 2011; Nissen and Risør 2018), to the effect that differentiating between infectious and non-infectious disease has become obsolete, both in the northern and southern hemisphere (Whyte 2012; 2014). Chronic conditions require care (Mol 2008), not necessarily self-medication (Fainzang 2017), but social care, which paradoxically is delivered increasingly through technological devices (Pols 2014).

So, germ theory advocated the combat of microbes in order to unspecifically prevent and specifically treat acute infections. Yet current health care is encumbered by chronic conditions. This requires a rethinking of medical principles. As research on the microbiome has shown (e.g. Hendy et al. 2021), fermented food has long been recognised as tasty and nutritious (due to a co-evolution of the human gut and specific microbes in its host's habitat). Furthermore, as will be argued here, fermented food is often psychotropic and modulates affect as well as atmosphere. This means it can be affectively uplifting, making people "feel lighter" (Hsu 2012), which is a "somatic mode of attention" (Csordas 1993) that can result in dispositions experienced as health-enhancing. To be sure, no claim is made here that feasting on fermented food is the one and only universal formula for treating and preventing 21st century chronic conditions. Rather, we merely can hope to preliminarily explore which fea-

tures of the sociality that feasting on fermented food generates are experienced as health-enhancing by the people who do so.

In Hendy et al. (2021), some authors foreground the interlocking of temporalities as essential to fermentation, others point out the multiple materialities that need to be mutually attuned to effect place making. In both cases microbial cultivation is known to be fraught with uncertainties as is any artistic co-creation. Uncertainty is in the case of fermentation generally experienced less as a threat than as a challenge that invites "trying out", playfulness and gentle probing. After some general reflections, we shall focus on those "figurations of fermentation" that can provide care for chronic conditions as an "art of the hearth".

Government-instigated health promotion: Initial reflections

In January 2013 I was struck to see in one of Lucerne 's public busses, a governmental health promotion that advocated socialising as preventive health measure, advertising weekly singing in choirs and dancing classes, all for free. The advert was issued by the Swiss Ministry of Health (BAG) which is staffed mostly by medical professionals. I was intrigued to see that they promoted socialising as preventive medicine—not just any odd socialising but a socialising through rhythms of movement and music. What a sensible health measure against conditions like chronic back pain, I thought, as they are known to be aggravated through isolation and loneliness (e.g. Honkasalo 2001).

A comparable concern, specifically targeting rural communities, was at the time aimed at preventing social fragmentation. It was launched not by the Ministry of Health but by the Bureau of Tourism. Among the communal activities it encouraged were events of socialising during the four weeks before Christmas in the *Adventszeit*. It was those convivial events that were marked by a particular sociality which was brought about, not least by feasting on fermented food. To be sure, feasting on fermented food was not advertised by the BAG as healthful. On the contrary, excessively snacking and drinking beer, wine and liquors is known to cause health problems such as overweight. And yet, there are aspects of cultivating and consuming microbes central to what we shall call "figurations of fermentation" which have a health-potential for everyone involved, also those suffering from chronic conditions. Before examining this claim with circumspection, the term "figuration" needs to be explained.

Figurations of fermentation: Some theory

Why speak of "figurations" rather than of "social structures"? The latter describe a synchronous socio-political order, while Norbert Elias's (1937) notion of figuration aims to foreground people's affective engagement, as instigated through specific bodily routines. Elias was trail blazing in this regard, being interested in how individual bodily urges like eating, sleeping, and defecating, and the strong affective drives that accompany them, became socialised. The notion of "figuration" which he coined would account for trends in historical developments of how people's "psychic household" changed over several hundred years. While his work has recently been taken up by medical anthropologists who speak of "transfigurations" (e.g. Mattes et al. 2020), "fermentation" has not been discussed as an aspect of his figurational sociology. In fact, it has barely been discussed in medical anthropology (one notable exception is Devish 1993), apart from science studies on the microbiome (e.g. Paxson 2013). In contrast to the notion of culture, speaking of "figurations of fermentation" foregrounds affective processes and the atmospheric, and in so far they also pertain to changes in the "body ecologic" (Hsu 1999: 78; 2002). [1] Fermentation is then a mode of interconnecting with the locality and its specific materialities (inclusive of microbes), and towards the making of place that can generate feelings of belonging (Feld and Basso 1996). However, given the many uncertainties inherent to any process of fermentation, their outcome is also uncertain. Figurations of fermentation have thus affinity with "ritual terroirs" (Chau 2021), which are not unchanging, but always already in the course of being transformed precisely through the ritual practices that connect them to the locality. In the *Adventszeit* social relations would be expected to be experienced, in figurations brought about by feasting on fermented foods, through a celebration of locality in a jolly and joyful manner.

Medical anthropology has furthermore been affected by the ontological turn (Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 1–29). When investigating "figurations of fermentation", we shall therefore be particularly attentive to specific materialities of the locality. In general, feasting on fermented food involves body techniques and social practices arising from a long-term hands-on engagement with the locality one inhabits, and hence is bound to reinforce one's "emplacement" (Howes 2005) or "empotment" into it (Hsu 2022: chapter 3). Yet, the very processes that enable emplacement and empotment have also the potential, as Chau (2021) shows vis-a-vis "ritual terroir", to completely transform the locality. Relevant for us here is merely that some of these "doings" ultimately can be health-affirming.

1 The body ecologic, like the body politic, does not have the clearly drawn out boundaries of the representative classical Greek body (Hsu 1999: 83), but comprehends social practice in terms of a body moving through space, enskilling into and becoming entangled with an ecology that it both shapes and is shaped by (see also Laplante 2016).

Yet the growth and cultivation of microbes that enable fermentation, which is a regulated process, is always accompanied by a tickle of uncertainty.

The argument: From the militant combat of microbes ...

When thinking today about microbes, Bruno Latour's (1988) first monograph comes to mind. It was based on his doctoral thesis. His method was traditional: it was concerned with semiotics. Yet the results of Latour's study were revolutionary: "... [S]ociologists of science think they are very clever because they have explained hygiene [i.e. the social movement of the hygienists] in terms of class struggle, the infrastructure and power ...", Latour said, while pointing out that, "the exact sciences elude social analysis not because they are distant or separated from them, but because they revolutionize the very conception of society and of what it comprises" (ibid.: 38).

"We cannot form society with the social alone. We have to add the action of the microbes," Latour continued, "... millions of omnipresent, terribly effective, often dangerous, and quite invisible microbes" (ibid.: 35 and 38). He reinforced this by saying: "Society can exist, live, and survive only thanks to the constant intervention of microbes ..." (ibid.: 37). In a medical encounter there is not merely patient and practitioner, there is also a *tertium quid* participating in this social event. This *tertium quid* is the microbe.

Pasteur's contribution was a fulcrum: He made the enemy visible (ibid.: 34): It was the microbe. As Latour (1988: 43, 47, 48) puts it: "The hygienists had been at war and were fighting on all fronts, ... They were everywhere, but were everywhere weak ... The hygiene that took over the doctrine of microbes became stronger and simpler, more structured."

Bruno Latour famously claims how in the 19th century Pasteur's focus on the microbe not merely led to the preventive medical practice of the pasteurisation of milk, but also to the 'pasteurisation of France' in so far as the study of microbes was not only to become central to the natural sciences, but actually transformed the understanding in the social sciences of what society was. Accounting for the microbe as a *tertium quid* gave rise to an understanding of society as an association. Sociology should be "not the science of the social, but of associations" (Latour 1988: 40).

... to figurations of fermentation

> Biologically, fermentation is ... defined as a process of anaerobic digestion and decay. It differs from combustion in that it involves micro-organisms [e.g. yeast] whose metabolism does not require oxygen to break down large organic

> molecules into smaller ones [e.g. sugar is metabolized into alcohols and carbon-dioxide] (Latour 1988: 40; information in square brackets added by author).

However, to understand the role of fermented foods when feasting—with hope, for health, at home—, Emile Durkheim's understanding of fermentation may be more relevant, and his understanding of the "collective effervescence" that feasting on fermented food and drink causes. Fermentation is here associated with a bubbling sense of life and effervescence (Durkheim 2015; Hsu 2019).

Like all organic matter that rots, fermented foodstuffs have strong odours and a distinctive taste that people either like or dislike. The predilection for specific fermented food stuffs is an acquired taste (Bourdieu 1984). Yet, rather than suggesting that the strengthening of national identity and nationalistic sentiment were health-enhancing, Ingold's (2000: 349–61, chapter 19) concept of skills and enskilment foregrounds the hands-on and technical facilitation of fermentation. This frames fermentation as a practice of enskilling oneself into the environment. As Ingold (2000: 197) puts it, agency is found in "rhythm" or in "the successive building up and resolution of tension" (Langer 1953: 126, quoted in Ingold ibid.), "a complex interweaving of very many concurrent cycles" (ibid.). In summary, rhythm interlaces a network of interdependent tasks, each with its specific resonances, that are embodied, and part of a generative field (ibid.: 200). It is not a matter of one adapting to another, say, people adapting to place. Rather, agency resides in an interdependent rhythmic entanglement.

By framing fermentation as a culinary art that prepares local food eaten by locals, people are seen to be enskilling themselves into their "body ecologic" and becoming part of its materialities, its taskscapes, its locality-specific spatial rhythms and resonances. The water quality matters, the inorganic mineral composition of the soil, the plant and animal species that this locality accordingly attracts, the microbes and microclimates they produce, the temperatures, the smells and tastes all matter. Culinary techniques for preparing fermented food differ accordingly in different places, and resist standardisation. To be sure, this attentiveness to locality-specific natural and ritual terroir applies also to the body politic of locally-produced fermented foods, which in the past was not merely locality-fixated. Rather, precisely due to their local specificities the locality became enmeshed with trade connecting into the wider world.

So, the genius of the [male] military strategist at the apex of a hierarchical body politic is no longer in the limelight. Rather, interdependent rhythms and resonances, finely interlaced, secure well-being. Chronic conditions become manageable, less through boundary control and the will to exterminate all microbes but more through the recognition that long-term care for the other, involves an inter-

corporeal sharing, which in the case of fermentation would be in accord with an artful regulation of the proliferation of some local microbial populations.

Figurations of fermentation

In what follows, four vignettes are presented that relate the lived experience of how people participated in different processes of producing and consuming fermented foods in remote parts of Switzerland. As argued here, they thereby "empotted" themselves into a locality in ways that are conducive to health. The notion of *empotment* (Hsu 2022: chapter 3) elaborates on that of *emplotment* (Mattingly 1998; 2010) in so far as both put single measures of treatment in wider perspective, through narration and/or negotiations over the texturing of the surrounding spaces: empotment highlights person-to-place interdependency. The focus is on "cultivation", both self-cultivation and the cultivation of the bacteria enabling fermentation processes.

The following ethnographic vignettes reflect on my visits of my *Aussteiger* (non-careerist) friends who settled in different language-speaking communities in rural, if not remote parts of Switzerland (remote in so far as they were outside the reach of the national railway, the *Schweizerische Bundesbahn*, SBB, but they could be accessed by the *Postauto* or local trains, and, of course, the private car). These vignettes report on chance encounters, and they should not be read as resulting from a carefully designed research project. Hence, they will not be subject to a strict comparativist analysis. The question we examine is what is specific about the diverse ways in which culinary techniques that facilitate fermentation create socialities that have salubrious potential.

Admittedly, the methods underlying this research are unusual, but they are in keeping with other anthropological fieldwork. In their introduction to *Search after method*, Laplante, Gandsman and Scobie (2020) call into question the usefulness of "method" for anthropological fieldwork and, instead, advocate "ways of doing anthropology as an improvisatory joining in with normative processes" (ibid.: 4).

So, the four vignettes are based on findings derived from a professionally learned attitude of being ethical and reflective as anthropologist, and they are also methodological insofar as these encounters have been submitted to criteria of ethnographic rigour. They are personal reflections on the question of what makes some of the figurations of fermentation so distinctive. What kinds of health-enhancing potential is contained in these recently revived, yet partially age-old practices? If they do celebrate the local body ecologic and, as we will see below, an egalitarian body politic, are they more of a problem than a welcome addition to the hierarchically structured health regimes of modern nation states?

The first vignette is from the Italian-speaking canton Ticino in southern Switzerland. It requires the reader to infer from the photos of material culture

the forms of social relatedness that shaped the production and consumption of fermented foods. The two following vignettes are about an initiative launched by a semi-governmental agency to revitalise the rural parts of French- and Romansch-speaking Switzerland by [re-]introducing *Adventssingen*. Finally, the fourth vignette from the German-speaking canton of Appenzell presents an encounter where no fermented foods were eaten.

1. Wine and cheese from cool caves in the Ticino

My attention was for the first time drawn to fermentation as a process that straddles the interface of "nature and culture," while looking at the black and white photographs selected for publication on "peasant art and architecture" in *Grotti, Splüi, Cantine* by Ralph Hut and Thomas Burla (1995). This publication was made possible only after the authors roamed for many years the steep mountain slopes that were covered by chestnut forests and interspersed with small meadows, some terraced, testifying to intense agricultural activity in the past. The photographers spent hours, if not occasionally an entire day, together or on their own, in front of an object, just to get the "right light".

Looking with one of the authors at these photos of now deserted cellars and caves triggered conversation about how, in the 19th century, wine and cheese would be enjoyed on Sunday after mass when villagers would migrate from the church to the outskirts of the village and congregate by the *grotto*. If a party became particularly jolly, they would start dancing. The granite dance platforms, stone benches and tables were providing a sadly silent testimony of this today. These festival platforms occupied, at the margins of often completely deserted villages now, a liminal space between the village and the forest. Their architectural structures reinforced this sense of liminality by artfully complementing the natural rock formation with stone masonry. This secured the "culturally"-monitored "natural" conditions for the fermentation process. In these cool, dark, and hidden spaces of the *grotto* constancy was cultivated, a constancy of a certain humidity and temperature that fosters life, namely, the many generations of bacterial lives that must be maintained throughout many years to mature both cheese and wine. These processes were monitored in subtle ways. They involved, in particular, body techniques effecting ultimately Ticino farmers' enskilment into their environment. For measuring the right temperature and humidity, for instance, no thermometer and no hydrograph was necessary. Observation of qualitative indicators sufficed—a certain spider species for instance, or rather, its traces, the much-welcomed spider webs at the entrance of a grotto—as an old man had revealed in a conversation with one of the photographers in broken Italian. Given their psychotropic and nurturing effects, these carefully monitored slowly fermenting products from the cool spaces of the *grotto* no doubt generated social heat in affectively intense transitional moments on the village's periphery.

This village-wide sociality of feasting on fermented foods when celebrating liminality, has now been discontinued. Yet the architectural remains testify to a figuration of fermentation of a once densely populated valley that thrived on people cultivating bacteria in the dark, yet due to decay, fecund spaces between granite rock and artful masonry.

2. "La goutte" dans le Petit-Val: The dew-drop that effects social heat

More than fifteen years later, in 2010, I was to experience such village-wide social heat that fermented food can generate. On the French-speaking borders in the region of the Jura, Paul, who after graduation in biology became a non-careerist, fetched me at the federal train station a fifteen-minute car drive away from the remote village in which he had built up an ecological mushroom farm but that, a decade later, he decided to sell for the sake of pursuing his interest in biology which led to a career, after all, in Basel's *Life Science* industrial complex. As he parked the car in front of his neighbour's house, he said: "Today, we are not cooking, you'll have to feed yourself on snacks". Little did I know that the "snacking" would consist of a feasting on fermented foods. We entered a large, old, stone built Jurassian farm house through a dark, narrow corridor that led us past the front room, i.e., the old living room, and the kitchen, and that opened into a large new dining room. About twenty people—men, women, adolescents, and few children—were busily chatting and laughing, drinking, and eating. The hostess had baked fresh white breads, one sweet, the other salty. This fermented staple was offered together with cured meats: this year's juicy *jambon*, two different kinds of lard, and then the fumigated *jambon* from a previous year, a true delicacy. Once the white breads were eaten, black bread was offered, and fresh fruits, then Christmas cookies. I had accepted a cup of hot and spicy tea, made of fermented leaf, from the hostess, but soon switched to the *Schnaps* that the host was offering, unaware that most guests had the courtesy to decline his servings; they left shortly before nine o'clock but, hours later, I found myself among a group of die-hards still sitting on the sofa.

One bottle after the other was brought out of the cellar. The host's father had been the only one in the village who had had a license to burn *Schnaps;* the villagers today all had to go to a distillery in a neighbouring village. We had started with *plumes*, then came the *poires*, the *apricots*, the *quinces*, the *pommes* and the *damassines*. These *gouttes* were *de vraie bio* (real organic-produce)—no one went through the trouble to spray the orchards with pesticides as they were considered "too unproductive".

Unlike fermented beers, these distilled drinks that were made of fermented produce from the orchard, had a high alcohol content, well of over 50 percent, as the old Jämy had once impressed on me (see photo in Brahier 1988: 45). Here in the Petit-Val, in which there was not even a church, villagers had their own ways of doing things, even if it went against "the laws made in Bern".

It must have been past mid-night when the host opened a particularly cherished bottle, and offered us a prohibited drink, a liquor made from the potato! As the potato was the main staple, its distillation had been prohibited by law at least since the two world wars, and the prohibition has not been lifted since. The host praised its refined taste: "It has a fineness that cannot be obtained from fruits".

While up to 1988 the municipality (then numbering 114 residents in total) was still predominantly inhabited by agriculturalists (15 houses out of 36 inhabited ones) and, generally speaking, milk production had steadily increased in the previous fifty years (Brahier 1988: 61), only two farmers were still in the village in 2010 (and six in the municipality as whole).[2] Switzerland has a policy of paying farmers at highly subsidised rates (a policy that would instantly stop with its becoming part of in the EU). Some consider this policy to reflect environmentalist considerations, and they support it, emphasizing the role of the 21st century farmer as "landscape gardener" (rather than as agricultural producer), others sigh about the conservatism of the Swiss farmer's union, interested only in getting ever more subsidies.

So, how exactly was the *goutte* made? Paul took me to the owner of a large old-style Jurassian farmhouse that one entered through a large hangar-like space. In this one space were shoe racks and pots of geraniums, bicycles, and skis, and a newly installed 5000 litre tank for storing hot water (from the solar panels on the roof). It was in this un-heated liminal zone between the freezing cold outside and the lived-in parts of the house that fermentation happened. We were shown several blue and grey plastic tons and half a dozen of very large balloon-shaped jars, and these fifty-litre bottles were filled with a transparent liquid.

Out of a one-hundred-litre blue plastic ton filled with damsons that were chopped up and stirred from time to time, to make sure the yeast was well distributed, people expected to distil 6–7 litres. It was local yeast that grew on the fruits, I learned later, no industrial yeast would be added. The fermentation of the damsons took perhaps six weeks at the relatively low temperatures of the Petit-Val. Then its container was closed to make the milieu in it completely anaerobic, before taking it to the distillery.

"Try some *gentiane*!" Our neighbour who had been showing us around his premises now uncorked one of the balloon-shaped bottles. *Gentianea lutea* is on the list of endangered species in Switzerland, but since it was a weed on the Jurassic

2 Most of the ca 90 villagers living in about 30 households were in employment in a nearby township, many had immigrated from other places, mostly from German-speaking cantons, but also from France (Bretagne), Germany, Turkey, Italy, and elsewhere. The foreign nationals constituted about one fifth of the current residents, not much different from the Swiss national average. One of the main employers of the commuters was the hospital in the nearby township.

meadows up there on the hill, he had obtained special permission from the municipality to dig them out. Three hundred-litre-tons could be filled by the washed and chopped root materials dug out in an afternoon; but each ton resulted in merely one litre of this most cherished liquor. *Gentiane* had a special taste, he said; it was very bitter, like a medicine. In fact, it was a medicine!, used both as a therapeutic and preventive home remedy.[3]

That evening, we went to a *fenêtre* (window) of a bungalow at the far end of the village. It was a newly invented tradition that each villager decorated a window of their house and light it for the first time on the day of hosting the villagers, and thereafter daily up to Christmas. It was a recent government initiative for revitalising remote areas. The window today showed a snowman amid nicely arranged pine twigs, and it showed the date, 6th December; the window on the following day showed a fairy-tale snow landscape made of fluffy cottons, through which cursed a small electric train; yet another one showed a sun set on a palm beach in the Indian ocean. Each window was different and distinctive.

Paul, his partner Regula and I were the first. The hosts were a recently remarried couple from German-speaking Switzerland; he had been a widower, she a divorcee. They hosted us in their garage; a dozen of white plastic chairs was arranged around a gas lamp and a plastic Christmas tree. "It cost only 15 francs in Aldi's" (ca 12 Euros), the hostess chided. Food was neatly arranged on a table, ranging from canapés and biscuits to nuts, mandarins and pralines, all from Aldi's, and a home-made cake. A large thermos flask provided hot tea, and since our hosts had heard about the jolly drinking party the night before, they soon started offering a newly bought bottle of *Kirsch* (cherry liquor) to those who took coffee. The guests were fewer in number this evening; some were familiar faces, others new. Gradually the garage filled with the chatter of conversation, allowing us an hour later to slip away unnoticed.

The following evening the house next door was host, it had snowed overnight, and temperatures had plummeted to minus fifteen degrees Celsius. Meanwhile, the feting house was brimming with vitality, hot and loud, with hordes of children and many new faces. Sweet hot punch was served, home-made bread and an oven-warm *quiche*. The complex flavours that the culinary art of fermentation produces were well on course of being side-lined by a predilection for sugar. Home-made Christmas cookies followed, and other sweets, after we had already left, as we stayed for a little less than an hour.

When Paul and I thereafter sat at the kitchen table of his house, I marvelled over the explosion of social heat in this village which otherwise looked rather quiet. We were nibbling on a dark bread and a hard cheese and shared a bottle of red wine. Evidently, these were fermented foods too, but ordinary ones of the everyday, rather than the high quality, freshly prepared fermented food offered when feasting. Red

3 Today, there is a shop in his house that sells precisely such liquors: https://gagygnole.ch/

wine and bread are also the meal of the sacred communion, I thought in this context; in this respect Christian faith accommodates to the modest means of the commoner. Until late that evening Paul and I talked about village life, inclusive of problems with neighbours and land disputes.

Nevertheless, when in the following year, as I visited Paul shortly after Christmas and inquired about the feting, he remarked that the atmosphere in the village had changed. Disputes over ridiculous issues had divided it. Only six families had made a *fenêtre* and hosted villagers in the period before Christmas. It was an invented tradition anyway, Paul added. 2010 had been the first year they ever practised it.

This vignette highlights that a psycho-tropically-enforced social heat is an important aspect of figurations of fermentation. Notably, the affective states of heightened gaiety often had a rebellious tinge, celebrating autonomy in a remote locality. The fermented food that was home-made was considered particularly tasty, and also healthy, while the human warmth and humorous banter around the hearth was both relaxing and uplifting.

3. Nus colliains (we hold together)—Engadin mobil

It was in the week before Christmas in 2011 that the long-awaited snow finally fell. Twenty centimetres of snow had fallen at night and another twenty throughout the day. Yet, rather than enveloping the village in silence, as new snow typically does, a frenzy of activity reverberated in it as the loud motors of Lazzarini trucks with frighteningly huge wheels, the height of an adult, pushed the snow around. "War on snow", I commented, as Miranda met me at the local train station of the RhB (Rhätische Bahn). Indeed, on that very day a woman had been killed by one such truck in the administrative centre of the region, she said as we were walking to her house at the upper end of the village.

Her three children were waiting for us in the hall of their three-storey high refurbished traditional stone house, ready to go to the *Adventssingen*. They knew me from the year before, and I invited myself for the day it happened this year. "It is an invented tradition," Miranda warned me on the phone. The woman in the village who had overseen tourism had initiated the *Adventssingen* some ten years ago. This woman had retired this year, and now the tourist bureau in the nearby township arranged these village events. So, rather than singing every evening in front of a different house that lit a "window", as the villagers did last year, only three gatherings had been scheduled for this year. The third one, which I attended, was coupled with the apparently first Christmas market the village ever held. This was a "German thing" I was told, overriding in an era of global commercialism the more traditional figurations of celebrating the *Adventszeit*.

When we reached the village square, it was snowing again. Enclosed by several-storey high, large traditional stone houses, the square looked rather picturesque,

even if one could not see from there, as otherwise, the nearby alpine peaks. The "window" in front of which we gathered to sing was a rather plain front door. It was decorated with light bulbs shining through small colourful felt lamp shades. The hostess was embarrassed not to have gone into more trouble. On the outside of the door, along the window's bottom edge, she had fixed several bunches of red rowan berries. I noted this with delight. "They get eaten by crows", the hostess replied, and Miranda agreed. Then, a man chipped in saying it had been a heathen custom to make use of them; the church claimed they were poisonous, which they were not. Another villager spontaneously said the same on a later occasion. The mighty church was presented as the supra-regional institution that cheated the locals who however saw through her power game, and resisted her incursions, by continuing to practise their local custom. I noted here a comparable spirit of resistance to the one encountered in the Petit-Val.

In the meantime, a group of people had gathered in front of the inconspicuous house door, whom the hostess each gave a song booklet. We were about fifteen women, some toddlers, a very quiet couple that was not from the village (tourists perhaps?) and one middle aged man. Miranda's eleven-year-old daughter stood next to her but did not sing as she had a sore throat. The first song, no. 5, sounded a bit hesitant. We then sang no. 1, then nos. 10 and 11; they were all in Romansch. Then, suddenly, as the one man in the group was joined by another one, they initiated a song for which the booklet had only text. "Oh no", I heard Miranda saying, "there are no scores." No one cared. The two men then initiated the singing of another song for which the booklet had only text and no scores, and again, they were heartily joined by the others, who evidently knew it well. Life had come into the group! Yet in this moment the hostess decided to collect all booklets and within less than fifteen minutes the singing was over. I was a bit disappointed. Not only had we not sung every refrain of the songs, but the singers had also not been offered any fermented drinks, and the plastic cup of mulled wine on offer cost as much four Swiss francs.

There were now about fifty people on the square, and in the following hour it filled up even more. Some villagers had put some old furniture on sale, others had brought food, one made Belgian *gauffres* over a little camping gas fire, the other served barley soup out of the thermos flasc. "It is typical for this locality", Miranda said, "they do not buy food off each other but each family eats their own". The prices were forbidding, also for the foreigner. Village folklore was evidently on its way to being commercialised, and the ambiguous complexity in taste that fermented food and drink often has, was replaced with either sweet dishes or salty drinks, and vice-versa.

Ten years ago, Miranda explained, when the singing was first introduced, villagers had apparently not known how to handle it. They had outdone each other, and apparently, before long, too much of the cured meat and liquor had been consumed

before Christmas. So, the municipality recommended that people only gather to sing in front of a "window", and no one was obliged to host the singers inside the house.

On my visit a year earlier, it was a delight to see that neighbours, i.e., the German-speaking *Zuzüger* (settlers) and the Romansch-speaking locals, were committed to singing together. They sung a variety of tunes out of the song booklet for some good twenty minutes, before gladly accepting the hot fruit tea Miranda had prepared, to which her husband added, for those who so desired, a drop of liquor. To be sure, it was not the best vintage out of the cellar, as I had been offered in the Petit-Val, but a rather bad brandy, as he told me later, a business gift he had received and could not otherwise get rid of. Since it was absolutely freezing cold, around minus twenty degrees Celsius, its warming qualities were very much valued and trumped over its awful taste. The entire event was over within the time of an hour. Teacups and song booklets were packed into the house and the children put to bed (or rather, in front of the TV, with their promise to go to bed an hour later), while the parents and myself jumped into their car to get to an experimental theatre musical—*Roti Roesli* (little red roses)—in the neighbouring village.

"The first time I came across this practice", Miranda explained, "was in Mexico. I used to stay in a convent, gathering strength—and restoring my health—before returning to the field. Throughout the month of December up to Christmas, the nuns sang every evening in front of a different door. It is a catholic tradition, really, but in the villages of the Unterengadin, except for Tarasp, which is already very Austrian and catholic, we are reformist". Miranda also pointed out that there had been a very old, presumably heathen tradition of singing on three evenings before New Year, rather than before Christmas, undertaken by adolescent girls and boys (Claglüna 2001: 44, "Sitten und Bräuche").

The village history also spoke of the villagers' spirit of resistance: "Wie sich die Ardezer Bauern 1918 einem sinnlosen Diktat aus Bern zur Wehr setzten" (ibid.: 29–34). Some courageous villagers had joined forces against the irrational imperatives from Bern (the federation's capital) and Chur (the canton's capital) to slaughter their cattle that had contracted foot and mouth disease. These village heroes deserve to be named, says the chronicler: "Claglüna, Fimian, Fratschül, Huder, Mengiardi, Marugg, Schucan and Vonzun", and gives their names in bold in the local history text, such that they spring to the eye of any casual reader.

In this context, Heiri Felix came to my mind, a now retired railway builder whom I had met the year before over several beers in one of the Engadiner cellars, as he too had resisted "those in Chur". He had refused to introduce audit culture into his group of workers. As supervisor of some twenty railway workers, he was expected to write a report on the performance of each of them, along a scale from one to six. When he gave them all the best possible mark, his superiors were puzzled and asked him to revise the report. "We are all equal when we work together", Heiri retorted. Only for himself he gave another mark, the lowest possible one. "Why?", his superiors

queried. "Were they really no longer aware of the code of honour that was part of the culture among honourable men [in this place]?" Heiri retorted. The egalitarianism of fellowship engendered self-respect.

By singing together—in an egalitarian manner—in front of a window enjoying each other's company and making new acquaintances, the relations between the German and Romansch-speaking, *Zuzüger* and local inhabitants were strengthened. It was expected to facilitate the "empotting" of new and old villagers into their locality. However, in this village commercialised considerations reminiscent of a German *Weihnachtsmarkt* were on the verge of generating sociality primarily through the circulation of money in the public sphere. However folkloristic the Tourist Bureau's recent initiative may have been meant to be, it worked in this village towards a commercialisation of social relations, and a monetised form of relatedness, and discouraged the sociality of *Adventssingen*, which initially had involved the serving of the delicacies resulting from a fine-tuned cultivation of local microbes.

4. A baked cake in place of a braided white bread

It was in the morning of Swiss National Day (1st August) in 2012 that I arranged to meet Rebecca and her husband on my way to a family reunion in the canton of Appenzell. I had inherited some twenty-five years earlier from my grandmother a loom that her neighbours held in custody but given that they themselves had reached retirement age and had sold both the house and the land of their farm the year before, space had become scarce. Our conversation centred on a deeply felt attachment to the locality, but fermented food was not offered on this occasion.

I had arrived an hour earlier than expected due to fabulous connections of the local train that had helped transform a once remote place into a suburban area. As Rebecca opened the house door, a waft of a fresh bakery greeted me, which she offered together with an entirely unexpected wave of human warmth. I was sat with my hosts into the cosy *Stube* and made to enjoy the oven-fresh *Gleichschwer* (cake made of equally weighted ingredients), and the coffee, which came with a *gutsch Schnaps* (a drop of liquor). My hosts were ever so grateful to a close relative of mine who had helped them keep the meadow intact that lay in front of their house. The previous owner had sold that land to a land developer, a firm that was to transform the meadow into an apartment block for commuters.

"Can you imagine", said Rebecca, "we fought the village government for over a decade!" They had provided support to a neighbour who went from the municipal to the cantonal, and even to the national level of justice, when finally, their legal process was successful. Thanks to an easement that had been granted to the owner of this neighbour's land in the 17th century, they were finally heard at the national level of justice. However, throughout this time, Rebecca and her husband were outcasts in

the village. People would avoid their company as they were seen to oppose lucrative development.

Villagers also tended to take sides with the tenant farmer to whom they had rented out their farm ten years earlier. Appalled by his way of treating their house, land, trees, and animals, they felt compelled to send this tenant farmer a termination of his contract in the very same year his tenancy started. They did so in full awareness that according to Swiss law the minimal period of a tenancy of any farm was ten years. After having to watch how their farm was being "run into the ground", year after year throughout a decade, they wrung themselves through to selling it. They sold it not to one of the contending villagers, but to the second son of a farmer from the catholic part of the canton. In their once distinctively reformist municipality, the selling of their farm to a catholic would make anyone to an outcast, and it no doubt consolidated their outcast position in the village. To be sure, "it was a social thing," Rebecca said, "not that religion really mattered that much".

Interestingly, the study of Christian religion featured more importantly in this study than anyone living in these regions would admit, and yet its historically given incursion into these remote regions had important socio-ecological implications. In the Ticino village the church was situated centrally, and the sociality fuelled by the wine and cheese from the *grotto* took place on the outskirts of the village in a joyous liminality before the exodus to America and the land flight of modernity depopulated the place (Wolf, in Hut and Burla 1995: 5). In the Petit-Val, the church featured through its absence. Here, where no forebears had built a church, an ethos of autonomy, if not rebelliousness was cultivated. And even in the Unterengadin, where alongside the catholic, the reformist church was also present, locals maintained an observable and explicit resistance, as they enacted practices that interlaced heathen with Catholic ones. Figurations of fermentation which kept these localities recognisably autonomous persisted in these areas not merely for gustatory and nutritional reasons, but also for body political ones, and for how they shaped the 'affective household' of the villagers. Interestingly, it was primarily for affective reasons that the social practices so central to the body ecological feasting on fermented foods were discontinued in the Petit-Val and this secluded household.

In this context it occurred to me that it was a special treat to be offered a cake, instead of, for instance, a slice of *Zopf* (braided white bread) to a cup of coffee. Naturally, making bread requires time, the time to ferment (*zum gaa la;* lit. to let it go) takes half an hour at least, and baking a cake takes about the same time. Yet cakes are culturally highly valued, presumably because they contain comparatively expensive ingredients. Bread is made of water and flour, white bread additionally of milk and an egg or two, while cake is made of sugar, butter, eggs, and flour (in the case of a *Gleichschwer* cake, all to equal amounts). A loaf of home-baked bread tends to be offered fresh to large groups of family and friends, but Rebecca and her husband lived a very quiet life; they had for instance no plans to celebrate National Day. The

cake was thus not only a special treat for an honoured guest, with whom one wished to speak in quiet conversation, a cake could be preserved for weeks in that characteristic metal storage box for sweets, inaccessible to mice and other pests. Due to its precious ingredients, a cake would not become stale and dry instantly, as does white bread, but could be eaten slowly, day after day, or it could be served to a future guest, particularly if injected with a refreshing zest of lemon.

Discussion

By viewing fermentation as a culinary art that involves an enskilment into the environment, human beings become part of the rhythms of the landscape and its taskscapes, and the resonances and concurrent cycles that constitute the generative field of any ecologically vibrant locality. Through engaging in the production and consumption of fermented food, people cultivate their connectedness to the locality, socio-politically and ecologically, meaning-wise and substance-wise, epistemologically and ontologically. Social and medical anthropologists speak of "emplacement" or "empotment" and consider such identity-forging processes to enhance people's sense of self in a way that has the potential to be health-enhancing.

Fermentation as a culinary art is not merely a metaphor but also a process that ontologically transforms place. Fermentation involves mutually attuned and regulated "doings" to ensure the delicate and easily disturbed connectedness between the organisms in a specific locality. There is a vulnerability to their associations, and also an uncertainty about whether they will flourish. While living organisms are to a certain extent self-contained and self-interested actors, the "figurations of fermentation" discussed above highlighted the interdependency of human and non-human "associations" in any locality. As food "stuff" fermented products that are digested shape and maintain social relatedness in material ways. Sometimes, forms of social relatedness can be smelled from the characteristic odours that bodies perspire. The local strains of bacteria, in combination with the local qualities of the soils, waters and airs, as well as the organic produce they sustain, assist human beings enthralled by their scent, taste and psycho-tropic effects which work towards modulating their affective household, to further enskil themselves into the locality and develop locality-specific ways of regulating their growth. Yet however locality-specific the fermented produce may be, its taste often appeals also to the foreign guest, rendering the social configurations fermentation gives rise to, to open systems interfacing with trends beyond the locality.

So, while *The Pasteurization of France* relied on a standard scientific eradication method of specific microbes to stop acute infectious disease from spreading in the 19th century, the figurations of fermentation that we discussed above were associations of indivudual distinctiveness orchestrated into a mutually attuned diversity.

The body ecological ethos of autonomy and egalitarianism that their cultivation enabled seemed to be endangered by the all-pervasive commercialisation of the body politic intrinsic to 21st century, in the Engadin, while, on the other hand, in the Petit-Val, precisely the prospects of commerce seemed to secure its future.

Finally, let us relate to fermentation as a culinary art that ensures the continued cultivation of certain microbial species specific to a certain place. Those species benefit from the locality-specific human art of the hearth. So, through such locality-specific human endeavour to achieve health, fermentation cultivates the proliferation of microbes specific to a specific environment. Fermentation as a socio-ecological figuration thus "makes place" by enhancing "interspecies dependence" (Tsing 2012) and "multi-species entanglement" (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010) and "becoming with" (Haraway 2008: 44), which dissolves the boundaries between "making and growing" (Hallam and Ingold 2014). "Living with microbes" and cultivating their habitat through "the art of the hearth", promises, in enabling ways, through caring for each other, to affectively modulate the living with chronic conditions in the 21st century.

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