



Universiteit Utrecht

# YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

*On how identities influence food practices and how food culture  
influences identities in Sosúa, Dominican Republic*



Master thesis Margo Verhagen  
Latin American and Caribbean Studies  
University of Utrecht  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis is about identity processes that are involved with the forming and implementation of a local gastronomic “foodprint” of a certain region. I argue that a gastronomic identity is at the same time a reflection of and an influence on people’s personal identities, and the forming and changing of one of them has its influence on the other. The research that is conducted to support this argument has taken place in Sosúa, a vibrant tourist town on the north coast of the Caribbean Island República Dominicana. In this town identity processes are more challenged than in others due to the almost constant presence of foreign tourists. These tourists come with a whole different set of beliefs, practices and demands, forcing the Sosúans to reevaluate their own identities on a higher frequency than in other cases. Other researches have been conducted on identity processes or food culture within the discipline of cultural anthropology, but the reflective relationship between gastronomic and personal identities has not been studied so far. This thesis will give insight in how people form and reform their identities when these are constantly challenged by others and in how these identities can be used as a commodity to improve a person’s position in a rapidly changing world.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

This master thesis is written for the study Latin American and Caribbean Studies of the University of Utrecht. The thesis is based on fieldwork that is conducted over a period of four months in Sosúa in the Dominican Republic. The argument will be built around existing academic debates on the subject assisted with data from the field research.

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE SUBJECT

Everybody knows Italian pasta, Mexican fajitas, Vietnamese eggrolls and even American hotdogs. These dishes are part of a gastronomic identity of a region. Some regions are known for their cuisine while others are not. Sosúa, a small touristic town on the Caribbean island the Dominican Republic, is not known for its gastronomy, but attracts tourists with its beaches and all-inclusive resorts. It is not just a coincidence that some regions are known for their food and others are not; it is part of a complex process of identity forming and promoting.

In this thesis I will explore the processes that are involved in the forming of a gastronomic identity and what influences these processes. I argue that a gastronomic identity is at the same time a reflection of and an influence on people's personal identities. How this gastronomic identity is displayed or used is part of a complex process of reflexivity on the self in relation to the other in a constantly changing world.

In some cases local food culture has been very popular and well-known for a long time, but in other cases it has been an active project to form and promote a specific local gastronomy as a tool to e.g. reinforce tourism. This active use of a (in some cases even invented) local gastronomic identity as a commodity is a strategy that is seen more and more in the tourist industry all over the world.

In the light of the globalizing tendencies all over the world, and increased general income that makes it possible for many people to travel the world, the encounter of strangers is a new component in identity processes and problematizes the subject. Because of this it has been an increasingly popular subject in the academic world, and many case studies have focused on processes and uses of gastronomic identities (Wilk, 1999) (Everett and Aitchison, 2008) (Bessièrè, 1998) (Stronza, 2008) (Jelenčić, 2006) (Palmer, 2005) (Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2009) (Jalis, 2009) (Fox, 2007) (Medina, 2003) (Wallace, 2009) (Palmer, 1998) (Schlüter, 2011).

I will start my argument by giving an introduction to my research side in order to get a better understanding of identity processes in the light of Caribbean history. In chapter two I will briefly shed some light on my research methods and findings. In the third chapter I will explore the current academic debate around identity processes and influences of food habits on identity forming. In chapter four I will run up to my case study by putting the research site in historic context.

In the next four chapters I will review in detail the case of Sosúa. First I will paint a picture of the existing local gastronomy of Sosúa in chapter five. I will look into local food practices, food habits

and the social act of eating. In the next chapter I will explore in detail how different groups of people express their distinctive identities through food habits and practices. In chapter seven I will go into the subject of the influence of the other. I will illustrate how others, in this case specifically tourists, can have a big influence on how the people of Sosúa see themselves. In the last chapter on Sosúa, number eight, I will explore how commoditizing the local gastronomy could have its influence on the people of Sosúa, not only in the light of economic improvement and other practical changes, but also on how Sosúans think about themselves in relation to their gastronomic identity. In the last chapter, the conclusion, I will review how these processes are apparent in Sosúa and how the Sosúans think about themselves in relation to the other in a globalizing world.

The four subjects that are reviewed in chapter five to eight are of vital importance in the understanding of reflexivity processes within the subject of identity forming. It is important to map out an existing gastronomic identity before this can be reviewed. Only then it can become clear how a gastronomy can influence identities and what the influence of this gastronomy can be on the way people perceive themselves.

It is important to zoom in on the heterogeneity of the Sosúan population before a relation and influence of an exotic “other” is researched. By painting a picture of all the different groups of people which live in Sosúa, and pointing out the differences, a generalization of the image of “the Sosúan” can be avoided. Making these nuances might complicate the understanding of identity processes because its complexity makes generalizations harder, but the outcome of the analysis will be more representative of the stratification of the Sosúan population.

As I argue, “the other” functions as a mirror to review the self. In this case not only other groups of the local population have to be considered, but even more so the non-local people who visit town. Tourists play an important role in the daily lives of Sosúan people and are therefore an important other to be considered in the process of reflections on identity.

All these people have an influence on how people deal with their identity, and how they display or use it. In many tourist towns a local identity or heritage is used as a commodity to attract visitors. The choice to use an identity in this way is influenced by the identity processes mentioned above, and is an expression of how people want to portray themselves, and in extend how they see themselves. Choosing to exploit one identity for profit has in itself again an influence on how people perceive themselves and is therefore part of the reflexive process of identity building.

This all has to be put in perspective against the background of a country and a region that know a complex past in which many parties have been in power, and have left their traces behind.

## **1.2 INTRODUCTION TO THE FIELD, FEATURES OF CARIBBEAN, DOMINICAN AND SOSÚAN CULTURE**

The research that is conducted to support the argument of this thesis has taken place in a small tourist town in the Dominican Republic. Not only this town, but also the country and the region in

which it lays have a complex history of domination and changes in ruling parties, which has problematized the formation of clear identities and a clear notion of the peoples' place in the world. Because many different people moved to this region a unique process of creolization has created a population with people from all kinds of backgrounds who have little shared history. The identity processes that take place in Sosúa have to be considered against the background of this process of creolization.

### *The Caribbean*

The Caribbean as a region is known for its tropical climate of leisure, beautiful palm fringed beaches and luxury resorts, but there is much more to it than that. Although the region is not of very big influence in global affairs the historical, cultural, socioeconomic, and political influences of the Caribbean far exceed its relative small size (Hillman in Hillman & D'Agostino, 2009). The Caribbean peoples have a shared history of exploitation through colonization, slavery, imperialism, neocolonialism, and dependency. Since the early 16<sup>th</sup> century the Caribbean countries have been under European rule (Spanish, English, French and Dutch), but most of them managed to gain independency after severe struggles for liberty. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 declared the Caribbean as falling within the sphere of the US, turning back most gained liberties and independences, and the Caribbean have been perceived as the US backyard ever since (Rogozinski, 2000).

Although the Caribbean countries have a lot in common in heritage and culture, there exists a division between the "Commonwealth" Caribbean (countries with an Anglo Saxon heritage) and the "Latin" Caribbean (countries with a Spanish or French heritage). Due to migration of different peoples to the Caribbean this division has blurred a little and the region has become a melting pot of different ethnicities. The conquerors of Spanish, English, Irish, Scottish, French, Dutch and German dissent mixed with the Indigenous peoples of the region (the Taínos, Arawaks, Caribs, Ciboney and Guanahatebey) and the African derived slaves. After abolishment servants were derived from China, India, and Java for cheap labor who settled in the Caribbean, and even later than that a wave of immigration brought west Europeans, south Europeans, Jews, Arabs, Latin and Northern Americans to the Caribbean. All these people brought with them cultural expressions and religious beliefs which mixed over time. Even the different peoples have blended which has created the unique Caribbean process of creolization (Hillman in Hillman & D'Agostino, 2009).

This process of creolization and the fact that most Caribbean countries have been under foreign rule or subjected to dictatorships up until recently have left little room for national identity forming. In most countries there has not been a process of nation building up until far into the second half of the twentieth century, so existing feelings of patriotism stem more from military force than a feeling of belonging to a country. This lack of shared patriotic feelings and a sense of having a shared history with the people that surround them, gives the people from the Caribbean a hard time defining who they are, and with whom they belong.



## ***Dominican Republic***

The Dominican Republic has a very special position in the history of the Caribbean - and even the Americas - because it was the first island Christopher Columbus landed on in his search for India on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 1492. Before the encounter, there lived a couple of Taíno Indian tribes who spent their days hunting, fishing and farming. For a long time after the encounter the island which was named Hispaniola remained in Spanish hands, but at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century the French colonized the western part of the island and in 1795 Spain relinquished the power over the rest of the island to France.

After this a few century of political instability and power take overs took place until the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo took power in 1930 and stayed in power until he was assassinated in 1961 (A+S Ideas Studios, 2010). A period of renewed political unrest with again a North American invasion after a civil war in 1965 took place, but from 1978 on the country made steps (back and forth) to democracy. After Trujillos death rapid modernization was implemented and this changed a lot in the position and structure of the Dominican society and the expectations and values of the people. (D'Agostino in Hillman & D'Agostino, 2009). There still is not a stable political situation and corruption is fairly apparent, but there have been some socio-economic improvements in the country.

The Dominican Republic has been independent from Spain for a long time, but the Spanish culture has always been and still is dominant over the African and Taíno culture. This still implies a slight racial preference towards people with lighter skin in contemporary times. (Sidanius & Sawyer, 2001). Nowadays 90 percent of the Dominicans are black or mulatto due to mestizo of peoples, but being black - although this is now more a social construct than a racial one - implies being disadvantaged. (Torres Saillant, 1998). Social classes are thus constructed along the lines of – socially constructed notions of – different skin color. This makes the social problems even more complicated than they are, because good education, health care and basic facilities are not available to most of the (darker colored) middle and lower class people, and the whiter upper class stays in power. A new white force has even come to the horizon in the form of Europeans and North Americans who are overtaking the upcoming tourist market by building large resorts and providing tourist facilities like dive schools and restaurants.

## ***Sosúa***

Sosúa is a small, but important tourist town on the north coast of the Dominican Republic where the presence of foreigners is an important factor that complicates social dynamics. The facilities of the town are shaped around the (perceived) needs of tourists, and local peoples' lives are touched by this. In chapter four I will talk in detail about the turbulent past of Sosúa and the rise of the tourism business. Important to note here however is how Sosúans are shaping their identities in relation to the always present tourists. Because many people from Sosúa are economically

dependent on tourism, the relationship between the two groups is a little askew in terms of power. Having the feeling of being dependent on strangers leaves the people of Sosúa with the notion of being inferior on an economic as well as a social level. This causes tensions and prejudice on both sides, which results in tourists being rude, unconsidered and demanding and results in Sosúans being jealous, greedy and insincere at times.

How these elements influence identities is explained in more detail in chapter three, but first I will briefly lay out my research strategies and show how I obtained the data that will help support my argument.

## **2 METHODOLOGY AND FIELD EXPERIENCE**

To gather data to support my argument I used different methods. Part of my data is of course coming from secondary sources, but I also did a four month anthropological research in Sosúa to gather primary data. For this research I chose different methods to come to an as complete as possible insight in the issue.

### **2.1 OBSERVATIONS**

To get a clear insight in the relationship between tourists and local people, and the places of both groups in the physical space of the town I made a map of the different zones in town. With the knowledge of the dynamics of space in the back of my head I observed how tourist would eat, how locals enjoy meals and how this comes together. The first observation I made was that it did not seem to come together. I only saw local people eat local food with local people, and tourist eating expensive food in restaurants. Even holidays, which were celebrated in public spaces, were not celebrated by local people and tourists together.

After I had an idea of the bigger pictures I started to zoom in, and discovered some efforts that were made to involve tourists in local culture by encouraging them to buy local food. This was however still just an effort made when people had time on their hands because local customers would not come, or had already been there.

The only strong effort of commoditizing local material culture that I witnessed was the omnipresent sale of what was called Taíno art. This was a painting style based on the one of the original inhabitants of the island. There were only two themes present, painted in very similar, sometimes even identical ways. Because of the overwhelming presence of this type of art it was very commonly known under tourists what it was, where it stood for, and why they should buy it. This might have contributed to the high sale rate of this commodity, something which was not visible with the local cuisine.

Although you can derive a lot of data from observations, to get some insight into motivations of people requires in fact talking to them.

### **2.2 INFORMAL CONVERSATIONS**

Another method I used to gather data was having informal conversations with people I met at a restaurant, bar, shop, and the streets, on the beach etc. These conversations were short and did not require a deep band of trust between me and my respondents, because I would only ask some simple and non-personal questions. Not having a personal band with people can have the benefit of them not wanting to give you the answers they think you want to hear. Because people don't know me and don't care about me as a researcher, they are less inclined to please me and give socially accepted answers. On the other hand it had the benefit that I was not familiar with their peers,

which gave them the opportunity to specifically tell me very personal information or information that could potentially harm their position. This was because the chance of me passing this information through to somebody they know was very small.

The information I derived from informal conversations was sometimes in the form of gossip or trash talk, which gave me a lot of insight in social dynamics of the town by reading between the lines. I understood from these conversations that there is on the one hand a lot of jealousy from local people, but also contempt for tourists. Contempt because tourists don't seem to display any interest in the local people or the local culture and jealousy because most of the tourists are much richer than working class Dominicans, and seem to have it all. On the other hand the foreign business people look down upon local people but envy them on the same hand. They look down upon them because they are thought of as being lazy and unreliable, but they are envied because they can be very relaxed and get away with not working their butts off.

Little conversations are not enough to get to a deeper understanding of people's motivations however, for this you need to invest in a relationship with your respondents and build a band of trust.

### **2.3 SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

For more in-depth information about perceptions of identity and motivations of people I did a few semi structured interviews with duration of a few hours. With this method I could retrieve more information than with small informal conversations, especially about feelings of belonging, attachment to the town and the region or even country. Also information about more private food practices such as with the family behind closed doors was gained with this technique.

The difficult part of this method is finding people who are willing to sacrifice a few hours of their time for you, in particular because they get nothing for it in return. And even if people are willing to help you they might and did back out when they understand that it is not going to be some chit chat, but an extensive interview about topics that might be very personal. But if you succeed, which I did several times you can hear things people would never just tell you in a short conversation. They would share their wants and beliefs, their fears and hopes with me, which gave me a rich insight in how they look to the world.

### **2.4 PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION**

To experience Dominican cooking to the full extent I cooked a few times with different people. With one of my respondents I did the whole process of grocery shopping in local stores, cooking the feast and serving it to guests, and then even enjoying the meal myself. In other cases I only helped preparing food, or assisted in another way in the kitchen. I would have liked to go home with one of my respondents, but in the end I only saw the inside of commercial or semi-commercial kitchens.

Part of understanding the food dynamics between tourists and local people required some research of the food that was served for tourists. To research this I went “undercover” as a tourist, and ate in as many restaurants as possible and was able to make a map of the food that are served to tourists. Sometimes I went as a researcher and had some informal conversations with waitresses and cooks about motivations of putting certain dishes on the menu, which proofed my earlier hypothesis that all the restaurants serve basically the same foods, because the common idea is that these types of dishes are what the tourists want to eat.

From my interaction with tourists from different countries I concluded that this hypothesis was not wrong. It seemed that tourists were looking for something they recognized and liked, like hamburgers, pizza and French fries. In different cases I have been with long term tourists (visiting more than two weeks) to restaurants that served typical food from their home country, like the German “Schnitzelparadies” and the Swiss cheese fondue restaurant, complete with Alp horn decorations. With most tourists I talked to it did not even come to mind to find a place where they served local cuisine, so the Sosúans are right about the lack of interest of tourists.

## **2.5 TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS**

The reason I used a lot of different research methods was not only to get different perspectives on things, but also because finding respondents was not easy. Tourists are looked upon in an ambivalent way as stated above, and as long as I was seen as a tourist I was not easily trusted by local people. I found out that explaining to people what I was doing was not very fruitful because they had a hard time seeing the relevance and decided on many occasions just to approach me as a tourist. This did not help me building a reputation as a researcher, and stood in the way of being trusted. I was able to use this to my advantage in the end, as I will explain in more detail below, but it was not easy to keep the spirits high.

Of course the language barrier did not help in connecting with Dominicans either. Although my Spanish is in theory level B2, my school Spanish was not very useful in this country where they have a very strong accent and a habit of pronouncing just parts of the words. This too improved over the course of time, and learning the local slang heightened my social status and therefore benefitted my research.

The upsides of trying different methods was that I got better and better at it, and am now more skilled in all of them, and my future researches will benefit from that. One of the most important things I discovered was that I could use some of the disadvantages to my advantage, like my position as a researcher.

## **2.6 BEING A RESEARCHER IN YOUR OWN POPULATION**

You always have an influence on your research group by being a researcher, but in my case this might have been more evident than in others. I have not been able to shake my image of being a

tourist completely, which had an influence on how people approached me. I have chosen to use this to my advantage by looking through the eyes of a tourist, one of the components who influence the dynamics of commoditizing a gastronomic identity. This way I could better understand at least one side of the story, even when I found it not really possible to integrate with the local people and being accepted as one of their own. By going undercover as a tourist and not putting too much emphasis on being a researcher, I managed to get a smaller bias in answers that could have been altered for a researcher to benefit other goals (like getting funds or pittance). By being treated as a tourist I experienced more clearly why people acted how they acted and choose certain strategies of business.

I only used this undercover method during observations and informal conversations, because I did not want to fool people who I did in-depth interviews or participant observations with. With these people I tried to build a professional relationship, but more important also band of trust. The professional side of the relationship made it possible to sit down with people and have extensive interviews, but the personal side made it possible for me to get them in a place where they wanted to help me. When I managed to build a stronger band it was even possible for me to return for more questions or to do participant observations, because my participants did not see me as an inconvenience or an obligation out of politeness anymore, but they started to see me as a friend.

### 3 IDENTITY PROCESSES IN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEBATE

This thesis is about how identities can influence the way people perceive and deal with the world. The specific focus lies on how people's identities have an influence on and are influenced by a gastronomic identity. To understand this complex process I first want to give an overview of the main theories about identity processes within the social sciences. After this I want to go deeper into the connection between food practices and identity forming. I will explore what a gastronomic identity would entail and what has changed in approaches to food over the years. In the final part I will investigate how identities and gastronomic identities can be used for a specific purpose. I will illustrate how these identities can be used as commodities to reinforce for example tourism in a certain region. In chapter five to eight I will explain how these processes work in the small tourist town Sosúa in the Dominican Republic.

#### 3.1 PERCEPTIONS ON PROCESSES OF IDENTITY FORMING

There have been many thoughts about identity forming, influences on identities and the flexibility of identities. Because it is a topic that is important for every person, not only scholars have debated the subject, but all kinds of people have some ideas about it. In a reaction to the assumption of many people that a person's identity is a fixed concept; a set of aspects that defines you as a person, different social scholars came with more nuanced ideas to explain the process. George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) explained identity forming processes in his book *Mind, Self and Society* in relation to what he called Symbolic Interactionism (Elliott 2008). He argues that a person's identity is formed through interaction with others; it is in fact a social product created by social symbolic interaction. People communicate (in contrast to lower animals Mead argues) through symbols: the symbolic meaning people give to objects makes it possible to see things more abstract, and this makes it possible to discover patterns and meanings. Mead points this out as the start of reflective thinking, the core necessity in the understanding of identity processes (Elliott 2008). Through reflective thinking we can learn to see ourselves as others see us, and adjust and transform our self-understanding in the light of social interactions and dialogues (Elliott 2008).

Erving Goffman (1922-1982) contributes to the idea of symbolic interactionism with the metaphor of the theatre. He sees the self reflected in an awareness of the different roles we play in everyday life. He adds the element of agency to the initial theory of Mead by explaining that we are not powerless entities that are shaped by the things that happen around us, but active actors who can decide how to act out their chosen roles and stage their role performances (Elliott 2008).

According to Anthony Giddens (1938-) post-modern times have made the perception of the self more problematic than described by scholars like Mead and Goffman (Giddens, 1991). Postmodernity comes with threats to the self such as fragmentation, loss of meaning and loss of individuality that make it hard to figure out whom to be. The identity people inherited from their

parents and social-economic class is no longer a stable and secure fact but has to be actively constructed in postmodern times. For this people need to learn how to trust in other institutions than the traditional ones like the church and the head teacher. (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). This new way of identity forming occurs according to Giddens through a constant process of reflexivity. He argues that “social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character” (Giddens, 1990 p. 38). People have earned to actively engage in opportunities and dangers rising from dramatic or even shattering transformations in their lives, and are in this way constantly actively transforming their identities (Elliott 2008).

Viewing identity processes of Caribbean people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can best be done with the theory of Giddens, seen as they live in a post-modern world which is in an active state of transformation and creolization (Rogozinski, 2000 and Hillman S. & D’Agostino, 2009). More than in other parts of the world people in the Caribbean cannot lean on inherited identities as there have been no clear ones and only in contrast with the other these identities become clear. A gastronomic identity is, like many other assets, not very apparent in this region and is therefore an interesting subject to study in order to find out why and how this is caused. I want to argue that food, even if it is not actively perceived as an indicator of identity, is still a very big part of people’s lives and does have a big influence on how people perceive themselves and the world around them. In the chapter below I will illustrate the importance of food in the lives of people and show how this influences ones identity and even how this can be used to a certain benefit.

### **3.2 THE INFLUENCES OF FOOD ON IDENTITY**

People have a careful approach in choosing their foods. This does not only have to do with biological factors of food like the possibility of it being poisonous, dangerous or unhealthy but more even with the symbolic importance of certain foodstuffs. People give symbolic meaning to food that might improve their status or change their identity trough eating them. Eating red meat for example in many cultures is believed to give someone strength, while eating other food could make you “spineless” (Fischler, 1988).

The consummation of a specific diet sets a person apart from others. By eating the same or eating different people can show their belonging to a group and the separation from another. Food habits therefore are a very important aspect in the forming of a personal or group identity. An example which makes this visible is the fact that people from a certain country distinguish themselves from another people be referring to them as “... - eaters” (Fischler, 1988).

The former example might give the impression that identities are a fixed concept, and ones established, never change, but this is not the case. Identities are socially constructed, and therefore, although inevitable, never fixed, because social life is always inherent to change and renewal (Verkuyten, 2005). Although the English people have long been known for their tea, they now also



drink a lot of coffee, and although the French might be referred to as “frog eaters” (Fischler 1988), only a few people of the upper class can afford this delicacy and this trait is therefore not inherent to all French people.

Although social identities, and identities constructed through food habits are a changing phenomenon and cannot be seen as static, you could distinguish processes of group identity forming through food habits. The separation of one group from the other is not only marked by the simple act of eating different, but this is a complex process in which a complete localized gastronomic identity can be formed.

### ***Localized gastronomic identity***

A local gastronomy is an intertwined concept in which how, where, when, what and why people eat certain things, is related to historical, environmental (geographic and climatic) and cultural (religious, ethnic) factors (Santich, 2004). These are the main indicators of prevailing taste components, textures and flavors in food. A regional or national culinary identity is determined by those factors and takes shape through the repetitive use of the same dominant ingredients and flavors and using the same preparing and presentation techniques. These prevailing flavor profiles of a certain region shape the gastronomic identity, although this is of course subject to change when one of the determinants changes. The two most influential determinants on gastronomic changes are product availability and current fashion, but there are many more (Harrington, 2005).

In earlier times food was derived locally and therefore a regional gastronomy was shaped through local agricultural and meat products. During the 15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century the international trade grew and bartering and commercial trading of food became common. The spice trade in these centuries had a big influence on flavor profiles all over the world (Atkins & Bowler, 2001). The “globalization of food” that has taken place since, has delocalized food and created a less obvious localized gastronomic identity. Although it is not clear anymore where the food people eat comes from or how it even grows, people remain true to their origins in some ways. In most places food that is locally grown or produced is perceived as higher in quality than foreign goods, especially when it is fresh in season (Harrington, 2005).

Not only the *kinds* of food people eat change over time however, also the *way* in which people eat changes. What fifty years ago could have been custom according to consuming food might have disappeared over time, or changed in form.

### ***Shifts in approaches to food***

While traditionally in many places in the world people would come home to eat the food that was prepared by the female head of the household in the kitchen or on the dining table, people tend to eat out more and more. Food is no longer something bound to the kitchen but is available everywhere and at any time. These changing cultural conditions force new traditions to emerge

(Duruz, 2001). What is striking in this tendency that if women do not cook for the family (mostly because they are busy with paid labor), the preparation seems not to be reallocated to other family members but is mostly purchased on the market (Duruz, 2001).

In this new trend gender relations are less articulate and people need other markers to set themselves apart from others. What can be seen among young people is that they try more and more to express their identity through ideological food choices. Vegetarianism, cultural beliefs about food and health as well as personal strivings for ecological welfare are used to understand the self and the world, and express one's identity (Lindeman, 1999).

Not only slow trends over the course of history have an influence on approaches to food, also more aggressive inputs, like the sudden appearance of foreigners in a specific region, can have a big influence on how people act towards, and think about, food.

### **3.3 THE USE OF A (GASTRONOMIC) IDENTITY**

A person's gastronomic identity is not so obvious in daily life but becomes more apparent when it is challenged by others. In the case of tourism it becomes instantly clear that different people eat different foods. The tendency to eat known food for safety reasons is evident in tourists who look for food they know and trust. This could lead to different reactions with the people of the host country.

In the example of Wilk (1999), the "Tale of two Meals" this reaction is very stunning. The first meal he ate in Belize was in 1973 when the country was still largely under British influence. He was invited to a local family dinner and looked forward to eat some real Belizean food, but what they gave him was food they expected foreigners might like. Almost twenty years later when he ate his second meal a lot had changed in the country. There was a big movement of nation building in Belize, and people no longer wanted to be subjected to British people and British culture. A sudden appearance of real Belizean food and real Belizean food restaurants took place. The people Wilk (1999) was invited to this time, did not try to serve him what they thought he might like, but were proud to let him taste "real Belizean" food. The most striking thing was that the food they served him was not very different from what they had eaten twenty years before, and the food that real Belizean restaurants served had been served for a long time. In search for a national Belizean identity people needed to define their new found identity as civilians of an independent nation state, with which belonged a national cuisine.

A similar thing happened in Cornwall, England. The region experienced in the early 2000 rural developmental issues, and was looking for another source of provision. It was already a touristic area and the local people found a way to increase tourism by promoting their local food. Food festivals and tastings were held and this increased tourist visits and prolonged stays of tourists (Everett and Aitchison, 2008). This had some unforeseen consequences, because people were

forced to think about their “true Cornish identity” to be able to serve “real Cornish” food. Of course food was not the only indicator of Cornish identity but it was perceived as an intrinsic part of developing a regional identity (Everett and Aitchison, 2008).

To create a regional or national cuisine there is need for certain products or methods of preparing food that are in contrast with the “other” (Wilk, 1999). The “other can be the bordering village or province or a neighboring country. At least a local cuisine has to be different from the cuisine tourist are familiar with. The “authenticity” of food being specific from a certain region is of minor importance in both the Belizean and the Cornwall case (Wilk, 1999 and Everett and Aitchison, 2008). There might even be some invented, reinvented or “borrowed” traditions. The most important thing is that people classify their food as typically from their region or nation and that notion contributes to form a separate identity (Everett and Aitchison, 2008).

The commoditizing of a local gastronomy has been very profitable for regions which experience an identity crisis or are in need of new sources of income. It was first seen in France in the 1980’s where the French government funded the promotion of regional cuisine to safeguard the culinary heritage in provincial France (Bessière, 1998). This attracted tourists and improved the local economy.

In more regions in the world this dynamic can be seen. Poor regions in Italy like Sicily are reimbursed by gastronomic tourism, because the local cuisine has been promoted, which has overruled the idea that the island is too dangerous to travel to because of the mafia. Japan has conquered the world with its Sushi, and everybody knows a Vietnamese eggroll. These examples proof that it could be very attractive for a specific region to commoditize their local cuisine if they want to attract new tourists and strengthen their economy. This can contribute to a local economy, but in extend can make it possible for people to open a restaurant with a specific regional gastronomy in another part of the world. This will gain a double profit, because by putting a region on the map elsewhere, it might make people want to go and visit the region of origin, reinforcing this way the local economy again.

### ***Commodification of cultural assets***

The trend of commoditizing gastronomic identities is part of a broader wave of exploiting cultural assets to benefit tourism. Many areas use this strategy to improve their local economy when this is in decline (Wallace 2009, Medina 2003). Commodification of local culture has been especially successful in cases where people built on an existing identity, ethnicity or heritage. In Brazil Amazon communities have increased their income dramatically by promoting handicraft items made of vegetal rubber on the World Wide Web as “traditional” products (Wallace 2009), in Belize communities have increased their income by starting to commoditize their Mayan identity (Medina 2003), in Malaysia as well as in Belize, and Cornwall, England tourism has been increased because people had started to promote their heritage and local (food) culture (Jalis 2009, Wilk 1999, Everett & Aitchinson 2010).

The use of the concept of heritage has been in most cases a powerful asset. The strength of the concept lies in its ability to form a strong identity by combining a few stereotypes of people, places and mythologies in one clear image (Palmer 1998). A shared heritage presents people with a simplified past that they can recognize as belonging to them and to the people around them. In many cases it represents a lifestyle that is perceived to have been better, more fulfilling and community driven than the present (Palmer 1998). People agree to accept this shared heritage, even if the facts of the past are a bit romanticized, and use it as a strong base upon which they can commoditize this identity and sell their cultural assets. Whether this heritage, image or identity is based on true histories and practices is to these people less important than the strong image that is created.

In the academic world there has been a discussion on the subject of invented or altered histories in the spirit of the creation of a local identity and the commodification of this. Some academics really disapprove of this invented identity, but others have a different approach. The tourism industry has been criticized for focusing on only a very small and desired part of history and presenting this as representative for the nation or region (Palmer 1999). On the other hand it is recommended to use a sterile image to increase the strength of the identity and reputation of a site and help the tourist economy in this way (Jalis 2009, Fox 2007). Medina (2003) even argues that the knowingly altered image causes for two cultures to come into being. One that is on the front stage and designed for the benefits of tourism and one on the back stage where people hold on to practices from the past that have meaning to them out of the context of tourism. This gives the feeling that you could talk about on the one hand a “real” but hidden set of cultural practices, and on the other hand a “fake” but useful set of cultural practices. Medina (2003) argues however that these installed cultural expressions over time become part of local practices and therefore part of the local culture, so over time the dichotomy between “real” and invented cultural practices disappears.

In the end we can conclude that, apart from the ethics of it, focusing on, inventing or altering a local identity can be very beneficial to increase a tourist industry. It does not really matter which part or cultural asset is highlighted, may it be handicraft, artisanal product or a local gastronomy, putting an assets like this in the spotlights can be beneficial in a lot of ways. Traditional practices are remembered, relearned or preserved, money is made, and tourists have had the experience of being part of a different world.

In the next chapter I will show how these processes are visible in the small tourist town Sosúa, and what has steered the direction of these processes.

## 4 CONTEXT

For my research about food practices and the influences this has on identity forming I went to Sosúa, one of the oldest tourist towns of the Dominican Republic. The town has an interesting and turbulent past, and has faced many changes over the last 80 years. Sosúa was not very well known before World War II. It was just a little banana farmer settlement in the rural backyard of Puerto Plata, the largest city on the north coast. In the dawn of the Second World War the Dominican dictator Trujillo however accepted a number of Jewish refugees and offered them the region east of Puerto Plata to build a settlement. Because Trujillo only invited the Jews to improve his reputation in the world and at the same time mix his people with what he saw as superior race, he did not really invest in their well-being after they arrived. Although the Jewish families built a community with a thriving dairy industry, many of them left in the years after the war because life in the Dominican Republic was too harsh for them. They left behind facilities like a modern hospital, and also many well educated young single males. These men married Dominican women and over the years more and more Dominican people came to live in the town. In the 50's the first hotel was built, and Sosúa was promoted by Trujillo as the place to be for a tropical holiday to foreign countries and in the Republic itself.

For 30 years Sosúa stayed a quiet dairy and fishing town, until in the 80's a big holiday resort was built between Sosúa and Puerto Plata. According to a few tourist guides, this gave a kick start to the tourist market in the country, and soon more hotels and resorts were built in and around Sosúa and the neighboring town Cabarete. For a few years the town grew in population and wealth, but a few factors contributed to a descending trend in this process. The development of Punta Cana in the west and Boca Chica next to the Capital in the south as holiday destinations became a severe competing factor for the tourist industry, which was increased by developments on a global level. Among the local people the idea lives that the two Gulf wars caused an international feeling of fear, and flights to the Republic were kept off for this reason, which harmed the tourist industry. The international monetary crisis from 2008 onward did not help the already recoiling tourists industry. Active government policy of promoting the country internationally as a tropical luxury destination has helped to turn the tides, but this policy has strongly been focused on Punta Cana, leaving the north coast forgotten. Sosúa and Cabarete had to survive on their own, and although Cabarete has been relatively successful in exploiting the reputation of being a perfect kite- and windsurf spot, in Sosúa the reputation of being a sex tourism destination has won from the beautiful diving sites. Many tourists come for a holiday where they can buy a girlfriend for a week or two. Middle aged white men dominate the streets, the bars, restaurants and beaches with on their side a young dark skin colored girl.

There is a strong policy of keeping tourists inside all-inclusive resorts by spreading the message that the streets are dangerous, to make it easier to sell guides tours and excursions. This causes the streetscape of Sosúa to be infused with middle aged white male tourists in the company of dark

skinned young female prostitutes who are not welcome in the resorts, while most tourist families never see the outside of their resort.

The developments in the tourist industry have had a large impact on the social structure and demographics of Sosúa. The town which was first concentrated around the fishing and dairy industry has adapted to the demand of tourists. Facilities to please tourists like restaurants, diving shops and souvenirs stands were erected and are now dominating the center and the beach of the town. Families who lived quietly in the El Batey part gradually moved to Los Charamicos, the part of town where in the past all the leisure facilities had been, but which have moved over time to the part where only Dominicans come, and no tourists set foot in. A sharp division has grown between the two parts, separating the tourists from daily Dominican life. Only the richer people can afford to live in El Batey nowadays because house and grocery prices have sky rocketed and no middle or lower class Dominican people can afford to live in this area. Water and electricity supply are more reliable in El Batey, not because the people in Charamicos don't pay their bills as is rumored, but because it cannot happen that the tourists would have no power or water, because then they would stay away, and the sole source of income of the city would run dry.

Most tourist destinations have a niche they commoditize to attract more people, such as a specific architecture, an interesting local history, a warm climate, beautiful nature, valued gastronomy or a combination of factors like these. Sosúa has as a selling point its warm tropical climate and clear blue seas. There are some beautiful diving sites that are exploited, but there is not much else that is offered. As stated above most people are encouraged never to leave their all-inclusive resorts, and they are told that the streets are dangerous, and that people should not go beyond the marked paths. Excursions are sold from within the resorts, so most tourist never even think of going into town and explore the local culture. In a small area of about half a square kilometer in the city center there are dozens of international restaurants where food from cuisines all over the world is offered. The main beach is covered with little restaurants, bars and souvenirs shops, intensively competing with each other over clients. The souvenirs that are sold depict a stereotype of "Taino art", the art of the original inhabitants of the island. Apart from this there is not much to be seen that points to a commoditization of local culture. Once in a while you can see a sign of local food being offered, but the effort they put in selling expensive sea food or paintings, makes the effort to sell their local food seem a little limp.

In this thesis I argue that the local gastronomy of Sosúa is not really commoditized for tourism although this might contribute to increase the flow of tourists. The tourists who are attracted by this are not only interested in staying in resorts, but who will go outside and spend their money in the streets where the local people try to make a living. In the next chapters I explain how this can happen, and why people like the inhabitants of Sosúa choose this strategy over another.

## 5 LOCAL “FOODPRINTS”

In this thesis I have been talking about how a gastronomic identity is at the same time a reflection of and an influence on people’s personal identities. I also argued that how this gastronomic identity is displayed or used is part of a complex process of reflexivity on the self in relation to the other in a constantly changing world. Now I have reviewed how identity processes work and what the background is of my research site, I want to dig deeper into what this all means for Sosúa where my research was conducted. In this chapter I want to illustrate local food habits and practices in Sosúa to get a picture of its current gastronomic identity. In the next chapter I will go into a little more detail and map out different categories of people and their different approaches to food, because there is not one static Sosúan gastronomic identity, but a number of different possible identities. In the chapter seven I will explore the influences of others in the forming of Sosúas gastronomic and personal identities. I will give special attention to the foreign tourists who are an important part of the construction of the town. In chapter eight I will review the possibilities to reinforce Sosúas gastronomic identity through the method of commodification of this identity. Together these chapters will explain how the dynamics of the construction of a gastronomic identity flow in a small tourist town on a Caribbean Island at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### 5.1 THE FOODPRINT OF SOSÚA

In this first chapter I am going to map out the food practices and habits of the people of Sosúa. I argue that these practices say a lot about how Sosúans see themselves and how they think they fit into the world. First I will look at what people eat in general and when, where and with whom. I will take a short look at changes in food practices and what this implies for the people of Sosúa. After that I am going to examine what people’s favorite foods are and what this says about their identities. With some examples I will illustrate how Sosúa could promote its own gastronomic identity to reinforce this, and gain pride and satisfaction out of that. In the end I will review whether identities are indeed influenced by food practices in Sosúa, and whether food practices are an influence on how Sosúans see themselves.

#### *The gastronomic identity of Sosúa*

The first thing that sinks in when a western foreigner takes a close look at Sosúas food practices is that the main meal is not eaten in the evenings, but in the afternoons. This is a more common practice in warmer countries, but not in most countries where Sosúa tourists come from. This already is a factor that sets Sosúans apart from the people who visit and is therefore an interesting aspect of their gastronomic identity.

The social act of eating in Sosúa is fact a social act, in contrast to the ever growing individualization in western countries. Traditionally eating is a family affair, and people still come

home from school and work at noon to eat with the family. “Because I am already here in my restaurant I mostly cook a quick lunch for the whole family, and when the kids come home from school, we sit down in the corner of the restaurant and have a family dinner. In the weekends my wife cooks because then she has the time, and she is a much better cook than me. I only cook for tourists, but she cooks real delicious Dominican food” (Cori). In cases where it is not possible to eat with the family the dinner is shared with colleagues and co-workers or fellow students, but hardly anyone ever eats alone.

Although there are tons of foodstuffs available, many Dominicans eat a very similar diet, including breakfast, lunch and dinner.

For *breakfast* people of the middle and upper class often just have some coffee, but only people with a job that requires physical labor eat a firm breakfast. “For breakfast I mostly have a black coffee and some fruit juice, but that is not normal in the Dominican Republic, most people have a heavy breakfast” (Anayris, Amarylis, Angelina, Cori). “I mostly just drink a glass of water, I can’t think of food before 11, but people who have to work hard do eat a lot of food for breakfast” (Kenia). “Although I am a dance teacher I never eat breakfast before my first class. I would see it right back if I tried. After this lesson however I go for a nice breakfast burrito or something else with a *cafecito*” (Mr. R. ). An exception to this rule is fresh fruit. Fresh fruit is not a luxury due to the fertile lands and is eaten by many people for breakfast, whichever class they are from.

The most popular breakfast dishes for the people who do eat breakfast however are mashed plantain, yucca, or (sweet) potatoes with fried or stir fried eggs and sausage. Also spaghetti with tomato sauce is popular as a breakfast dish. Overall the components of a Dominican breakfast vary widely and are different for most people.

*Lunch*, the main meal of the day is much more similar of components than the breakfast. The dish that is eaten most is “*La Bandera*” (the Flag) and consists of rice, beans and chicken. There are many varieties to this theme like “*moro de guandules*” (rice with pigeon peas) which is often served with chicken or sausage and “*pica pollo*” (deep fried chicken with deep fried plantain). Rice is the main grain that is eaten, while corn and wheat are less popular. Corn is used in its fresh form to supplement dishes like “*moro*” and wheat is used mostly in the form of flour to bread meat for frying or to make bread (which is not eaten much by Dominicans). Both grains are used to make porridge, but these dishes are not the most popular (“I really don’t like porridge, please don’t have me eat porridge” (Amarylis). Chicken is the meat that is the cheapest and therefore eaten most, and pork is second. Beef is very expensive and rare, so not very common, and fish and seafood are only available for the rich. The Dominican diet consists for a significant part of vegetables like sweet peppers, onions, garlic, tomatoes, pumpkin and other vegetables mainly from the *curcubita* family. These vegetables are often mixed with rice and beans to make a hearty meal or served as a side dish. Fresh salad of lettuce or white and/or red cabbage is only a small luxury and is eaten whenever possible as a side dish.



*Dinner* is an interesting meal. It can vary from an extended home cooked meal existing of different (side) dishes, but some people could only drink a coke and call this dinner. If a meal is cooked in most cases it is simpler than the lunch course. Its main ingredient is in most cases not rice but what is called "*vivero*": plantain, root vegetables and different kinds of potatoes. This is combined with some simple meat like chicken or (pork or chicken) sausage and some vegetables when they are available. In many cases however a real meal is not consummated but often sweet dish like corn or wheat porridge with cinnamon or a just bar of chocolate. "If I had a big lunch I often do not really eat anything for dinner, maybe a coke or a bar of chocolate" (Angelina).

The explanation for this lack of appetite might be because during the day a variety of little bites is eaten which are available on the streets from salespeople on food or little stalls. Most popular are *empanadas* or *pastelitos*, little paddies with fillings of cheese, vegetables or meat, and sweets made of honey and nuts like peanuts and almonds. Also deep fried balls of yucca or rye with a little filling are very popular. These snacks are not mentioned by most respondents, maybe because they are not considered real food. But I have witnessed not only my respondents, but also many other Sosúans eat these little snacks in the afternoon. This habit is a significant aspect in the Dominican cuisine, but this is not very obvious to the people of Sosúa.

During the day people drink a lot of *cafecitos* (little cups of strong coffee), fresh juices, sodas, beer and rum. Alcohol is consumed from early in the morning until late at night, although the later in the night the more frequent drinks will go. Rum is a local product and is consumed on its own or mixed in with cola or sprite and lime to make a "*Cuba libre*" or a "*Santo libre*" respectively. Rum is also mixed into fruit cocktails on a regular basis, to be sold to tourists, to drink with the family or with a group of friends.

Some specific dishes are not consumed in daily live but only during special occasions like holidays. For Christmas everybody makes an "*ensalada Russa*" a potato salad with red beets, with Easter everybody drinks "*habichuela con dulce*" a sweet bean drink with cinnamon and clove, and with weddings or other festivities "*Sancocho*" is made, which is supposed to be made with at least seven types of meat, and seven different types of root vegetables. Sharing these specific dishes on the same special occasions creates a feeling of belonging together and reinforces the notion of belonging to the same country. Having these clear notions of what is done on a specific occasion helps forming a clear identity where national habits are an expression of belonging to this nation.

Most traditional Dominican dishes take a lot of time to cook, because ingredients have to be chopped fresh and are only available in large quantities, and it takes time for rice to cook. Pre chopped vegetables or parboiled potatoes and rice are not very common, and pretty expensive. If you want to eat cheap and healthy in the Dominican Republic you need to cook for many people at ones, which is not always convenient, and this causes changes in food practices. From cooking and eating in the home, people are changing to eating more outdoors; quick and easy.

## 5.2 CHANGING FOOD PRACTICES

As in most western countries, in the Dominican Republic too, you can see a trend of people leaving the traditional kitchen table behind and choosing take away food over a home cooked meal. The skill of cooking Dominican dishes is therefore becoming a disappearing craft in the republic. According to Duruz (2001:23) the everyday life experiences of the current young people, those of generation X (people who were born between 1965 and 1978) “are shaped by contract and casual employment, real wage reductions, diverse household arrangements, renting rooms in share households rather than working towards homeownership, and an orientation toward networks of friends and “public” leisure, rather than the mythical “family unit” and the “home” as a “private” space.” The home cooked meal, which lies at the bottom of a local cuisine, is in danger of dying out due to this way of life, and it does not make it easy to turn this around.

This change in food habits has its influence on family and community dynamics and in extent on how people see themselves. The dinner table, where families sat together, discussing their daily experiences, has had to make room for the couch and the television or impersonal take away places. The family dynamics are changing due to this new form of consuming food into a new form that is not really crystallized yet. But not only family dynamics are changing due to this phenomenon, also gender roles are less obvious than when the female head of the household was responsible for a home cooked meal. Women in Sosúa are working more and more outdoors, which leaves them less time to prepare food for the family. “I always cooked for my daughter and me, but now that I am working in this hotel I just buy lunch and throw something together for breakfast and dinner. In the weekends I still cook, but not just for me and my daughter but also for my cousin and her children, because I don’t like to cook for just the two of us” (Amarylis). Although it might have been the case, the task of cooking is not taken over by other family members, but by commercial institutions (Duruz 2001). Eating is in this sense no longer a family matter, but an exchange of means for commodity; money for food. This is increasingly seen in Sosúa as well as in the rest of the world. “my mother always cooks lunch, but I like to go to a pica pollo for lunch or have some fried pork” (Kenia). “Normally my wife cooks a simple *sancocho* or something, but if she does not have the time, I go for some take out Mexican food or something. My wife is not a very good cook because she is English, but when I cook, I cook delicious Dominican food. Admitted. I only cook at most twice a year” (Mr. R.).

Although you can see that eating is becoming more a sort of grazing (Duruz 2001) and home cooking is a disappearing art, this has a funny effect. Because home cooking has become a rare asset, its value has increased. People who do cook a meal are viewed upon with admiration, and take away stores are taking advantage of that. “Home cooked meals” are prepared for purchase, commoditizing a dying art of normalcy (Duruz 2001). In Sosúa this is to be seen on the main beach and on the streets. Little tiny restaurants or just street stalls serve “homemade” Dominican food that is for sale for a lower price than any other food in town. This shows that many Sosúans,

although food from every corner of the world is available, choose to eat traditional Dominican food. This shows that they value their own food, even if they don't want to or are not able to cook it themselves.

### 5.3 FAVORITES AND NO-GOES

That Dominican people like their own cuisine became even more apparent when I asked people what their favorite dish was. I was expecting some rare or festive dishes, but almost everybody pointed to a very common, easy available and often eaten dish. "I adoooooooooooooooooooo rice, everything with rice is good"(Ileana). "I really like white rice with pigeon peas and pork, my grandmother used to make that every Sunday for me" (Mr. r.). "It depends on the day, but you could wake me up for rice, friend pork, duck and beans" (Cori). "Give me *moro* with chicken or fried pork. I like meat and high carb foods more than vegetables or fish" (Kenia).

This shows that although most people in Sosúa do not recommend their food to foreigners, they really like it themselves. If they could choose from everything they could imagine, they chose their own daily food every time. In this light it is strange that not many Sosúan people speak proudly about their own cuisine, and this influences the way they value themselves as Sosúans.

### 5.4 CONCLUSION

The culinary capital, as is explained by Bourdieu (Brown, 1973) of Sosúa is much bigger than people would like you to believe. Local inhabitants as well as tourists have never spoken highly about it to me. "O yes, this is Dominican food, would you like to try it, it is very cheap!" (food sales person on Sosúa beach). "Are you going to research Dominican food? Why, they just eat tasteless rice, beans and chicken every day. You will be done researching in a week!" (Western man who immigrated to Sosúa). But the Dominican cuisine entails much more than people tend to believe, and has much to offer to the world. The people from Sosúa are in general not proud of what they have to offer, and agree with tourists that the only nice thing of Sosúa is the beach. This notion might change when an emphasis is put on reinforcing the local gastronomy and putting it on the map the way it was done in L'Aubrac and Cornwall. This might change how Sosúans feel about themselves and increase pride and confidence in who they are.

## 6 SORTS OF FOOD AND GROUPS OF PEOPLE

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

I have argued that a person's food choices are a reflection of his personal identity, but it can also be an indicator of a certain group identity. Like Fischler states it: "The way in which any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently" (Fischler 1988, p. 275). In this chapter I argue that a person's identity and in particular his or her place within a group, is reflected in the diet choices of this person. I argue that people's choices of food correspond with the choices of people from the same group like a social class, a gender or a group of friends and sets them apart from others (Fischler 1988).

Most people have not one fixed idea of their self but possess a variety of identities or roles and on top of that a variety of possible ideal selves (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Being in different settings calls for being a slightly different version of oneself, and food choices help expressing these different roles.

In this chapter I will review how people express themselves through their food choices, and how that is representative for a specific group. I will look to differences between social-economic classes, differences between age groups, different habits within families and groups of friends and finally I will review differences in eating habits between men and women.

To analyze this issue I want to use the theory of Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998, p. 138) "In postmodern consumer culture individuals are engaged in a constant task of negotiating meanings from lived and mediated experiences as they endeavor to construct and maintain their identity. As part of the resources for this task they utilize the symbolic meanings of consumer goods [...]". This theory claims that it is not just what you eat that defines someone as a person, but the symbolic meanings that are attached to certain consumer goods built up to a complex of messages from which a certain identity can be read. On top of that, not only what people consume or choose not to consume can tell something about the perceptions of the self, but also how, with whom and where. Below it shows that it is a little more complex than: "all the Dominicans eat the same: rice, beans and chicken" (Mr. R.).

### 6.2 GROUPS OF PEOPLE

#### *Rich and Poor*

People from different socio-economic classes often live very different lives. They live in different neighborhoods, go to different stores and have different jobs. The working class in the Dominican Republic is the largest class by far, and has not much to spend on food let alone luxury food items: "Poor people, the vast majority of this country, eat to survive" (resp. Mr. R.). The upper middle class

is much smaller than the working class, but still an important part of the population. These people have often (limited) access to power and running water and in middle class neighborhoods streets are more often paved and facilities like sewer systems are in better condition than in poorer neighborhoods. The upper class consists of a very select amount of people who are “disgustingly rich” (Bernhard, German tour guide) and can afford “everything they want, including private jets and multiple cars” (Bernard)

In this piece I will illustrate food habits per class, and comment on what this implies for peoples identities. Important to mention is that I did not talk to very rich and upper class people on many occasions, so most information about this subject is learned from other informants.

The diet of *the lower class* is without much variation, people can only afford: rice, rice, rice (Kenia) or more nuanced: rice, beans and plantain (Angelina). Because the poorer people have to work hard they eat food that is higher in carbohydrates than people from the middle or upper class. They in fact need a big breakfast to get them through the day, something people from the middle class not often eat. People from the working class mainly eat big quantities of plantain, yucca and rice. When there is a little more to spend they complement their diet with cheap vegetables like peppers and onions (Cori) and lower quality meat like boney chicken parts and salami sausage (Mr. R.).

In their diet the whole lifestyle of this class is reflected. Most agricultural work or factory labor is as monotonous as their diet. People from the middle class look upon these people as being simple; simple in mind and simple in habits. This is not always expressed directly but can be read between the lines. Being looked down upon by other people has its influences on how people perceive themselves, and feelings of inferiority are unavoidable in this case.

People from the *middle class* can afford more expensive foods including different vegetables and meats. Still there is not a lot of money to eat many other meats than chicken, salami or pork for most people, but this already opened possibilities to have a more varied diet. Vegetables like broccoli, cauliflower, eggplant and butternut squash which are not affordable for the working class complement the always apparent onions, green peppers and garlic (Cori). Simple beef stews are sometimes on the menu, and “international dishes” like pasta are affordable for the middle class. Take away food, which is omnipresent in Sosúa and the neighboring village Cabarete, is also more affordable for people from the middle class, and increasingly popular (Kenia and Mr. R.). The *Pica Pollo*, a little snackbar type where you can get mainly fried chicken and fried plantain is the most popular for take away food, but also small Dominican style hamburger stalls on the side of the road are increasingly in favor. “my mother cooks lunch every day, but although I live with her, mostly I go to a pica pollo for lunch, or have fried pork. I just *adore* fried meats!” (Kenia).

Because people from the middle class are able to afford what might feel like whatever they want if you compare this to the lower class, this gives them a feeling of satisfaction. “I can eat whatever I like and I know I am in a privileged position. Not everybody is as lucky as I am” (Ileana). The people from the Dominican middle class can still afford a lot less than they tourists who are in town all year

round which causes some feelings of jealousy, but middleclass people who are not confronted with rich tourists everyday show a great level of confidence and pride in who they are.

People from the *upper class*, which is by far the smallest, can afford to eat everything they want: beef, fish, seafood and expensive vegetables and fruits. "Rich people can have barbecues whenever they want, which is not possible for people from the middle and lower classes, because meat is the most expensive foodstuff"(Cori).

People in the higher classes eat healthier than people from the lower classes, because what is mentioned as healthier foodstuffs are the most expensive e.g. fish, seafood and vegetables (Kenia). The most affordable foodstuffs (rice and plantain) are very high in carbohydrates but low in vitamins and minerals, which causes for a gap not only in economic but also in health status between the higher and lower classes. Rich people cannot only afford more expensive foodstuffs, but also better quality food, so if they buy meat of the same animal as somebody with a smaller budget, the cut is often better. Chicken breast for example is easier to cook than chicken legs or wings, but only affordable for the richer people (Cori).

Because the rich upper class is in a privileged position and they have gotten there for a reason, they are not looked upon with admiration by the lower classes. They are seen as selfish because they do not want to share their wealth, and the rejection is even stronger when a rich person is in a position of power e.g. a person in the government. These rich people on the other hand feel like they deserve this great wealth and show happiness and pride in who they are. Of course there is a lot of envy from the lower classes to the people in more privileged positions, which influences their judgment in a certain way.

Although the differences in *quality* and *variety* of foodstuffs between distinct social classes are significant, between age groups the differences lay more in *sorts* of foodstuffs.

### ***Young and Old***

People from different generations in Sosúa have very distinctive food patterns. My respondents made mainly a distinction between the older generation eating healthy and the younger unhealthy. This conclusion was drawn from the fact that older people eat less greases and easier to digest foodstuffs like potato puree and soups (Kenia, Cori, Anayris, Ileana). They also tend to eat softer foods, like mashed plantain or yucca, soups and stews, instead of fried chicken and fried plantain (Angelina).

What is striking however is that the younger generation does not simply eat what is seen as higher in carbohydrates and fats. They don't eat the same food stuff with the only difference that it is prepared in a less healthy way like deep fried instead of boiled potatoes. Instead of rice beans and chicken, they eat potato chips, French fries, sodas, burgers, cereal (Ileana, Anayris) and other things that are not just less healthy, but also American or international based dishes. It is seen more often that the adolescent generation tries new things to find their own identity, but in this case the young adults are part of the postmodern generation. According to Elliott & Wattanasuwan (1998) these

young people are actively looking for other role models than the family to find their own way to be. So what we have seen before, that most youngsters turn back to the way of their parents when they have their own family, is less sure with this generation. Through exploring foods that are from a completely different world, young people incorporate a piece of this world, and will come out changed at the other end. This change might be so big that they are not going to be like their parents, and food habits that have been there for decades and sometimes centuries might be permanently replaced by other ones.

### *Families, friends and colleagues*

Although family units are not always according to the nuclear family model (father, mother and children) in Sosúa, the family life plays an important part in most people's lives. Eating the main meal together is important to most people and fathers and mothers even come home from work to eat with the children at midday (Cori, Mr. R). If there is a family meal the family eats together at the table and also the same food. Only in the exception that one of the family members does not like something that is cooked he/she could eat something else, but this goes more for dinner than for lunch, the main meal (Kenia, Amarylis).

Friends have often a couple of things in common with each other, but food habits are one of the most apparent denominators. "It is like with clothes: nobody wears the same clothes, and nobody eats the same foods" (Angelina). Also Cori was of this opinion: "I like dried fish and sardines, but nobody really does that. People just like different foods". But apart from the overall thought that food habits are not relevant in a friendship relation, there was a comment that kept surfacing: "my friends always eat only Dominican food, la Bandera (rice, beans and chicken). They don't know anything else, because they don't know other cultures, and they don't want to know" (Kenia), or: "Yes, everybody in the Dominican Republic eats the same things. Always rice, because it is very cheap and grows in the inlands (it looks like Asia back there), so it is available for everyone" (Mr. R). In the lower classes there is not much choice in food, so if people would want to eat different than their friends it is not even possible. The desire to be able to choose your food and express ones values through food choice is very apparent, but poverty forces people to be more similar than they want to be.

What is not something that defines friendships is in fact a common denominator with colleagues. In the cases that working men can't go home for lunch they would share the meal with their colleagues as a replacement for the family. Traditionally one of the wives would cook something and bring it to the group (Mr. R.) but in 21<sup>st</sup> century Sosúa this farmers' tradition is replaced by take away food stalls where the meal is purchased for the group of colleagues. Although this is interesting in the light of socio-economic change in food habits, it has surprisingly change little in the group dynamics of colleagues.

Interesting to note here is that it seems that people who are somewhat forced to be together because they have been born in the same household, or chose the same profession have a very

similar diet, while people who choose to be together like friends do not eat specifically the same things. Food does not seem therefore a very important factor in the expression of a friends group identity, but is so with families and co-workers.

### ***Men and Women***

According to the battle of the sexes and the saying that men are from Mars and Women from Venus, it seems likely that men and women would have very different food habits. Especially in a region where the *machismo* ideal is believed to be present with many people, gender differences are expected to be found in Sosúa as well. Men and women however both told me over and over again that there are no differences what so ever in food habits between the sexes in Sosúa. Men might eat in some cases slightly bigger portions, but not even always. Cori told me that women could eat as much as men in this country because they move a lot more than western people, and stay in shape that way. People walk the beach, walk through town or have a swim in the ocean. I have spoken however to women (Ileana) who were very aware of the Dominican diet being high in carbohydrates and therefore fattening. Slimming down is as much a topic here as everywhere else, but maybe on a lower intensity level. This might have something to do with the physical ideal of women that is very different in Sosúa than in the western world. Women have curves and show them off, even if the curves are much bigger than would be appreciated in western cultures. So skinny women who are to be seen in Hollywood movies, are hardly to be found in the Dominican Republic. Like Anayris told me: “women like me eat to be full and satisfied, I am not going to spend money on expensive fish and salad if I can only get a tiny portion and feel hungry all day!” The virtue of restraint is with most women of the lower classes not highly validated although most of them say to be faithful Catholics. Especially in eating and dressing practices with younger women there is not much to be found that would indicate this virtue to be important.

There is however a distinctive difference to be found in consumption habits, but more in drinking habits than eating habits. This difference lies not specifically in practice, but in preference of flavor and quantities. “Women drink more beer than men, but that is only because men drink more rum” (Kenia, Anayris, Angelina, Ileana). This joke is based on the fact that the consumption of alcohol lies very high in the Dominican Republic, rum and beer being the most popular drinks. “We are the 3<sup>rd</sup> rum producer in the world, and 60% of this stays in the country (spokesperson of the Brugal Rum factory). Rum is often mixed with Coca Cola or Sprite to make Cuba or Santo Libres, or it is mixed with fresh fruit juice to make cocktails like Piña Coladas. Men and women enjoy a bottle of rum together, may it be with friends, family or even acquaintances who walk by (Amarylis).

## **6.3 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I argued that a person’s identity in particular his or her place within a group, is reflected in the diet choices of this person. I argued that people’s choices of food correspond with



people from the same group. In general this was the case for Sosúa, except for the social group of friends; food does not seem to be the common denominator that is the glue that holds friends together. But especially people from the same social class or family eat very similar foodstuffs. For the lower classes food choices are indeed often made out of necessity instead of free choice. In the higher middle and upper classes however people have the option to actively create and express their identity through consumption of goods and food like was suggested by Elliott & Wattasanuwan (1998). In Sosúa this notion is most visible with young adults who are the ones that make food choices that are different from that of their parents and ancestors. Instead of the chicken, beans and rice they choose French fries, hamburgers, fajitas and tortillas. In the choice of this diet not only the difference between the generations is underlined, but also a desire to belong to the globalizing world community is visible from this behavior. By eating “international” food (Kenia) like hamburgers and taco’s somebody can express that he knows and values not only things from his tight personal circle but is aware and appreciative of what the rest of the world has to offer. In this way young Sosúans are not simply copying food habits to be like the envied tourist, but they use the available input to create a new identity, an identity of a modern world citizen.

The level in gastronomic mobility seems to correspond with social mobility. Young people of the middle and upper class, who have many opportunities to try different social roles, are also the ones who are most flexible and original in food choices. Older people, especially in the lower classes, have not many opportunities to reevaluate who they are, and what they should do to change or reinforce this because they need all their energy to supply in their basic needs and often in the needs of children or other family members. This way they are less inclined to use others as a mirror for the self, like I am going to talk about in the next chapter.

## 7 “THE OTHER” AS A MIRROR FOR THE SELF

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

In earlier chapters I have discussed that a person’s identity is validated through social interaction and that the self is imbedded in social practices (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). When a person is in his daily routine amongst the people who are always there, there is not much reason to consider one identity over and over again. If a person suddenly meets someone new, this is reason to reflect one’s own identity in the light of the other, because this new input can teach a person a lot about the self.

In this chapter I argue that being in contact with strangers is a catalyst for change in how a person thinks about himself. If the relationship between the two people is not equal, and one of the persons is in his home place working, while the other is in another place celebrating a holiday, this causes tensions (Stronza, 2008).

In this chapter I will start with some academic remarks on the subject of identity challenges through the encounter of strangers and illustrate this with examples of Sosúa. I will give some special attention to how this process of meeting others has an effect on what local people will offer to tourists. I will shed light on how Sosúans have altered their whole town in relation to the increasing demand of tourists.

The second “others” in Sosúa are the Haitian guest workers. Because of the long history of hostilities between the two people, Dominicans and Haitians try to interact as little as possible with each other. Although this creates an interesting case to study in the light of perceptions of the other in relation to racism, discrimination and hostility, in this chapter I will focus on the relationship between tourists and local Sosúans. The effect on perceptions of the self through this more ambivalent relationship is less obvious and therefore more interesting to review.

### 7.2 THE TOURISTS AND THE LOCAL

“When tourists and locals meet, their encounters are like windows that double as mirrors: each site uses the other to peer into a new world while at the same time casting back impressions, and reflecting on themselves through the eyes of the other” (Stronza, 2008:244). How the two parties perceive each other is however not in a very nuanced and open minded way. Tourists as well as locals have stereotypical ideas about the other that they project on the stranger. This is a mechanism that is used to serve as a culture translator (Jelinčić 2006); a tool to simplify the process of making sense of the others wishes needs, and purposes. On the one hand this makes it easier for people to understand each other, but on the other hand it causes resentment because the other is not willing to see a person as a distinct individual but only as part of a simplified group with just a few very articulate features. The imbalance between the two groups does not benefit the smoothing of the relationship. Most tourists are from rich western countries visiting poorer

countries and have what the local does not have: “freedom of travel, free time and financial superiority” (Jelinčić 2006:186). The host has to be working and serving the guest, while the guest was able to read up on what to expect of the tourist site, and the host has no way to be able to know what to expect of a guest who comes to visit. This gives an advantage to the tourists who already were in an advantaged position, leaving the host with a greater feeling of being inferior, seeing that priority is given to the needs of tourist over his own in many aspects.

Being in an advantaged position does not mean that tourists are the only once influencing the identities of the hosts. The simple fact that at tourist is on a holiday, away from his daily worries makes that he can temporary be a different person; he wears a different “hat”. In his “escape from reality” (Jelinčić 2006:188) he can be anonymous in the new place where nobody knows him, and ramifications because of undesired behavior will not by far be as strong as in the home community. This is why tourists not always act polite and try without shame to get lower prices and better deals in a way that would be frowned upon in the home country. This causes the local population to raise prices for tourists anyway, and take advantage of their ignorance by selling them as much (worthless) goods as possible (Jelinčić 2006).

It might seem that host communities are completely at the mercy of the demand and rude behavior of the tourists, but this is not the case. Although host communities are often adapting their identity and cultural supply to the desires of the tourists, they are not without agency in this matter. Like in the case of Infierno (Stronza 2008), the local community chose his own (re-invented) images to represent themselves with, in this way actively creating an identity for the tourists. These invented identities can be based on completely made up images, but in most cases these identities created for tourism stem from heritage notion of a certain region. This can be from an ethnic angle like in the case of Infierno (Stronza 2008) and the rainforest communities in the Brazilian Amazon (Wallace 2009), but also from historical icons such as in the case of England (Palmer 2005) or from gastronomic heritage e.g in Cornwall (Everett & Aitchinson 2010), in Aubrac (Bessière, 1998), in Malaysia (Jalis, 2009), or in Croatia (Fox, 2007). An invented or reinforced local identity benefits tourists, because it paints a clear picture of a site that they can understand and value, but it also benefits the local inhabitants. By having to present themselves in a way to tourists, they are forced to think about their identity; what to put in the spotlights, what to keep in the background. In the end these identities are going to be part of a person and might trigger the positive effect of increased self-respect, pride, confidence and solidarity within the local community.

Sosúa as a small tourist town is a good example of a site in which identities are challenged because tourists and local community members are forced to interact with each other. Most Sosúans work in the tourist industry, may it be as a hotel clerk (George), a performer in an animation dance team (Mr. R.), a cleaning lady in a language school (Ileana), a restaurateur (Cori), a bar owner (Jan) etc., and are in daily contact with tourists. That these two groups form an opinion about the other is very

clear, but that being with the other might change one opinion of the self is less apparent, and therefore reviewed in the next part.

### 7.3 THE UNBELIEVABLY ARROGANT GRINGO'S AND THE LAZY SOSÚANS

Talking for two minutes with a “gringo” (a term that is used by the inhabitants of the Dominican Republic to indicate anybody with a slightly western look), is enough to hear a lot of prejudice and stereotypes of Dominicans. “They [the Dominicans] have no work ethic, they do as little as possible, and if they have enough money to get through the day they will simply stop working. I will never employ a Dominican again. On top of being extremely lazy they have the idea that gringo’s are in depth with them, because they have been born rich, and never have had to work for it. They always ask me for money, even when they know I have been living and working here for years and earn the same amount as other people in the same hospitality business” (Jan, a Dutch bar owner in Sosúa). “Dominicans are always looking for a short cut to rip off gringos: they have strategies to lure tourists into their shops and are very aggressive in their selling methods. They will tell girls and women they are very beautiful, even if they don’t think so, just to get them to buy something, and they also just block people in their way and chase them into their shops, even if the tourist showed no desire to buy something (George, a Haitian immigrant who works in a hotel in Sosúa). These comments represent the feeling of many foreigners who live in Sosúa for a long time, but also of tourist who have been there longer than a few days.

But the hostile feelings go both ways; local inhabitants have the feeling that the tourists are occupying all the nice places in town (like the beach), that they are getting better provisions like steady electricity and running (hot) water, while ignoring the local people and pretending they own the place. “Most tourists are not interested in our local culture; they just want beach and pizza” (Kenia). “The reason why I don’t serve local food to tourists is that they simply don’t want it. *La Bandera* is not good enough for them, they want fish and seafood, not chicken and rice!” (Cori). “Tourists have caused many problems: they make prices skyrocketing and attract prostitution and criminality. Right now it is even worse, because there are less tourists than before, so the local economy has to suffer, but the high levels of crime and prostitution have not declined, which is even worse for the [reputation of] the town” (Kenia).

The fact that the local inhabitants are for a large part economically depending on tourism causes feeling of frustration. On the one hand they want the tourists to be there because they are their most important source of income, but on the other hand they would like to see the tourists gone, because they dominate the town, and dictate how local life is shaped. Being dependent on people who seem to have a better and easier live gives Sosúan people the feeling that they need to defend themselves: “Dominican people are very nice, friendly, loyal and social people. I am proud to be part of the “first nation of the New World”. What gringos sometimes don’t get, is that their existence was made possible by our existence, because we were here first” (Mr. R.). On top of the

arrogant attitude that many tourists display in Sosúa that locals have to swallow to stay in business, their whole community feeling and feeling of belonging somewhere is disrupted by the tourists. “Because of the built of all kinds of tourist facilities in El Batey, people had to move from their homes to the other side of town, breaking up the existing community dynamics. This contributed to the overall vibe of people feeling a little lost, because Sosúa is not really the home of anyone anymore, especially the El Batey part of town” (Trudi).

It seems that through the rapid changes in the town dynamics, caused by the demand of others, Sosúans had to re-establish the ideas they had of themselves; who they were, who they are, and who they are supposed to be according to the people they depend on. It looks as though the Sosúan people have found a new way of reevaluating themselves, in which they accept to be economically inferior, but morally superior to the tourists who visit the town. They might have to answer to the needs of the tourists, but that does not have to mean they have to feel inferior as a person. Below I will take a closer look at the influence the demand of tourists can have on local people and their surroundings.

#### **7.4 TOURIST’S DEMAND**

Although not all tourists can be placed in one category, when someone goes on a holiday, this person wants to go away from his daily routine, and find something else instead. Some people want to find peace and simplicity in the form of e.g. and all inclusive resort, but others are looking for something more. Some tourists want to experience a new culture and desire to “undergo a process of (re)socialization during their holiday in what they hope to be an “authentic” culture” (Fox, 2007). This asks for some icons that indicate “otherness” from their homeland. In a reaction to this demand tourist sites often start to produce “cultural icons” like local artwork or food products especially for tourism. The mass production of products like this has the negative effect of leaving no opportunity for other traditional crafts to be made anymore, or local products are sold as luxury products to tourists while the local inhabitants use an industrialized variety of the object that is made in a factory rather than by local craftsmen (Jelinčić, 2006). Either way, tourist demand changes local customs.

These “cultural icons” are a small part of the earlier mentioned invented local identity for the sole purpose of tourism. But the demand of tourists does not only effect the identity forming of local people and the perceptions they might have of their selves, but it can have a big influence on their physical space too. While enjoying a local culture, tourists need a place to sleep and to eat and tend to other basic needs. Because of this hotels are built, restaurants are erected and diving schools are started, influencing in this way the demographic structure of the town. In the case of Sosúa this has had a big influence on the structure and dynamics of the town, and where local live took place a few decades ago, there are now hotels, casinos and restaurants.

## 7.5 SOSÚAS SUPPLY

I came to speak about this subject with a woman who had moved from Germany to Sosúa decades ago and has seen the changes with her own eyes. She told me: “In the eighties and before the dynamics of this town were really different. The El Batey part of Sosúa was back then the quiet family part of town, and in Charamicos were the dance bars and cafés situated. If you wanted some action you would go to Charamicos. Even the few (simple) hotels of Sosúa were situated in Charamicos. After the build of the big resorts in El Batey things started to change. There was a need for foreign food, and international restaurants appeared. Tourists did not feel like walking to the other side of town every day, so all kinds of tourist facilities like bars, souvenir shops and discos were built in El Batey. The families retreated to the outer residential areas of El Batey and Charamicos, depriving the centre of El Batey of more typical Dominican towns’ dynamics.

So in Sosúa the tourist industry has not only changed the identities and representation of people, but it has changes the whole town and community appearance and dynamics. A town that was a quiet fishermen’s community changed into an artificial village of tourist facilities which is the “home of no one” (Trudi). This process of alienation has left little ground for Sosúan people to build a strong identity on and decreases feelings of belonging and safety. The feeling of artificialness of the town is even reinforced by the presence of endless streets existing of only restaurants and bars, serving the same “international” food and drinks. This dynamic is also spread out over the whole main beach, where little restaurants and bars fight for a place to serve tourists the same idea of tropical leisure.

Because cheap all-inclusive resorts attract simple middle class people from western culture who have no desire for much else than beach, party and simplicity there is little demand for local culture in Sosúa. Some souvenir stalls try without much spirit to sell “Taíno art” which could be seen as a “cultural icon” although there is not much emphasis on the historic value of the art of the first people of the island, and many sales people know even less about the Taínos than your tourists guide will explain. The effort to sell or promote local gastronomic goods is even less apparent. When I asked a Dominican woman who was selling Dominican food if her food was in demand by tourists, she said: “No I mostly only sell to local people, but you can have it, it is very cheap”. In her sales pitch not even some spirit or pride of her product was to be found, let alone a link to her cultural background.

In short the demand of tourists has had a big impact on local life in Sosúa, but if the benefits have been other than on economic ground stays in question...

## 7.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I argued that being in contact with strangers forces a person to review his ideas about his self. I argued that if this relationship is not equal e.g in the case of a tourist and a local inhabitant, this causes tensions. In Sosúa this is clearly to be seen. The upcoming tourism industry

has changed the whole community, and relations between tourists and locals are not smooth. Through stereotypical thinking from both sides there are a lot of misconceptions of the other. Locals feel underappreciated because the whole town is built around facilitating tourists, while they are left with high grocery and rent prices, higher criminality and prostitution figures and a feeling of living in a surreal surrounding. The tourists on the other hand feel looked down upon, are charged higher fees and are being ripped off when possible.

In some cases (like Cornwall, the Brazilian Amazon, the Mayans) promoting local culture and focusing on heritage has caused for a positive reinforcement in people's perceptions of the self. These people developed a feeling of pride and belonging through their shared localized identity. This is not very apparent in Sosúa however. It might be because there seems to be no real focus on local culture and local assets, so there are not many assets that trigger feelings of pride by the inhabitants. The features of Sosúa that attract tourists have nothing to do with the people; it is the climate and the beaches. Because these features have nothing to do with the people, this might increase the feeling that tourists have no respect for the local inhabitants and only occupy the few good spots in town. Whether commodification of local cultural assets might change the focus on local culture and therefore interest from outside is discussed in the next chapter.

## 8 COMMODIFICATION OF IDENTITY

### 8.1 THE USE OF A CULTURAL IDENTITY

In the academic world there is more and more interest in the use or commodification of some kind of cultural identity for monetary profit. Heritage tourism is a booming market and an increasing number of sites discover the profitable benefits of exploiting a feature of their culture. Especially ethnicity (like with the Mayas (Medina 2003) or the people from the Brazilian Amazon (Wallace 2009) is a concept that is discovered as a rich source of exploitability, but also other aspects like architectural (e.g. the Eifel tower, the Empire State building, the Taj Mahal), historical (e.g. the Chinese big wall, the Colosseum, the Greek temples, Stonehenge) or gastronomical (like in Italy, Spain, China, Japan, Vietnam or Mexico) features are used as a means to reinforce tourism.

In this chapter I am going to focus on how cultural and specifically gastronomical identities are used as a commodity in Sosúa and other places, and what motivates people to do this. What are the influences of others in this process; is a specific demand important in what is offered by the local people? I will analyze the case of Sosúa and compare this to two other cases in order to see what is different and what has influenced these different approaches and outcomes.

Some preliminary researches indicate that commodification of cultural assets has been or could be very contributive to a region. The Mayas in Belize (Medina 2003) and the Indians in the Brazilian Amazon (Wallace 2009) have shown that an existing but almost disappeared ethnic identity can be used as a commodity when people re-identify with this ethnic background and portray themselves as original inhabitants of a region with a rich cultural heritage. First the acceptance of this identity was a strategic move to reinforce income, but after a while people incorporated this reinforced identity and really felt like the people they were first pretending to be. In the case of Malaysia (Jalis 2009) and Croatia (Fox 2007) local people were not aware of the possibility to commoditize the cultural assets they were sitting on. Preliminary research pointed out that there was a lot of demand for expressions of local culture and gastronomy by the visiting tourists, but this realization has not hit the local community yet. But even if they were aware of this fact, there is no way to predict whether people even want to exploit their cultural assets for profit through tourism. In these two cases only the future can tell. The cases of Tomás Jofré in Argentina and Voss in Norway however show that commoditizing a local gastronomic culture can be very beneficial for a region. How this could be for Sosúa will be reviewed after.

### 8.2 THE CASE OF ARGENTINA

Tomás Jofré has always been a quiet little farmer's village just 150 kilometers out of Buenos Aires. People lived from the dairy and grain industry and everybody lived his simple life. In 1924 this changed when the local store became popular for its food. One dish in particular, the *raviolones* (a



big kind of ravioli). This dish attracted people from the neighboring villages, and in the weekends the quiet town changed into a vibrant site where everything revolved around food. When the railway closed a lot of people had to move away from the village in surge for work. The few people who stayed used their culinary reputation to pull the village out of the rut. New restaurants were opened, and local products like sausages and jams were made on a bigger scale. The local tourists that were attracted by this gave the local economy a boost, and the town was saved (Schlüter, 2011).

By finding a niche in the market, the people from Tomás Jofré were able to turn the tides on themselves, and a culinary heritage, which was built on just the one dish, was used to revive the economy and save the inhabitants of the village.

### **8.3 THE CASE OF NORWAY**

This case is a little different because it does not evolve around a little village that was saved when it was on the verge of bankruptcy. Voss is a village in Norway that had already a thriving tourism economy based on extreme sports, when something new put the village on the map forever. Although mutton had been on the Norwegian menu for a long time, because of general raise in welfare and changes in food habits, it was almost nowhere to be found anymore in Norway. Especially the dish *Smalahove*, made of a sheep's head was only still made in Voss. It had been a chic dish, and the first people who asked for it were wealthy businessmen. Because they asked it to be served in a traditional setting, the farmer went with it. The meal was a great success and from this day onward the dish was served more regularly to tourists. More local product were added to the meal to give it a more authentic feel, and in a short period of time the dish was so popular that merchandize goods were made and sold in its honor like mugs and jewelry. Because of its repulsive sight, it appealed to the risk seeking tourists who were already visiting the area. The revival of this dish might not have saved this village, but it increased its income dramatically (Gyimóthy & Mykletun, 2009).

Voss already had tourists, and a tourism based on its natural reserves, but focusing on a gastronomic heritage made the tourism business much more lucrative. Although the dish was not even specifically from the site, it was pitched as a local product and surrounded with more local product, what gave people the impression to stumble onto some real culture; something that is attractive to cultural tourists.

### **8.4 CULTURAL CAPITAL OF SOSÚA**

Sosúa is a little similar to Voss. Sosúa is a place in which cultural capital is not scattered onto the streets, and the tourism business thrives on its natural reserves such as the beaches and the coral reefs in Sosúa, and the mountains and lakes in Voss. What sets Sosúa apart from other tourist towns in the region however is that it has a unique history. The town was started by Jewish

immigrants and knows a flourishing history of dairy farming and fishing. Nowadays there is not much to be found that reminds people of Sosúas Jewish heritage. Mr. R. explains it as follows: “I know that Sosúa was formed by Jews although I have not lived my whole life in Sosúa, but that is not important anymore. Even if they built the town with their ideas of what should be in their like factories and farms, when the second generation was born they knew they were becoming a real Dominican village. People who are born in this country belong to it, and that is why Sosúa is not Jewish but Dominican”. Although that is not the only reason for a seemingly absence of Jewish culture in Sosúa (many Jews left Sosúa after the second World War, leaving mostly Dominicans and descendants from mixed marriages behind), it might have some truth to it. The only things reminding Sosúans and tourists of the Jewish history is a museum that is tucked away between rows of loud bars and an abstract memorial site, which is - at least by the tourists - seen as a nice arty park, not a statement of Jewish history. Tourists “is this a memorial site, I thought it was a nice park with benches, I did not see the star sign in the grass, o and yes, there is something written on this glass tableau, aaaah a Jewish flag high up in the sky, didn’t notice it!” Although the park was very recently built (2006) it did not contribute much to the awareness of Sosúan history due to its design, and the lack of local people offering explanations. In short: Sosúa has a rich and interesting history, but not much is done to put this on the map or use it as an attraction for tourists.

What is used to attract tourists is Sosúas nature. The beautiful beaches and snorkel sites, palm trees and nice weather are used to attract many people, and the whole town is built around that. All leisure activities evolve around the water: snorkeling, diving, sailing and other small water sport activities. All these tourists attraction have however nothing to do with Sosúan culture. Only the already existing reserves are tapped into for exploitation, not the culture that is hand built by local inhabitants.

It might seem there is not much to be gotten from the people from Sosúa; that they are faceless tourist servants who have no culture and have only nature to offer, but I would like to contest that. Although the Jewish religion is not very apparent anymore, most inhabitants are fanatic Catholics and have many celebrations and rituals surrounding this faith, like the procession on the beach during Semana Santa (the week around Easter). Also many special dishes are associated with Catholic holidays “with Christmas everybody eats *Ensalata Russa*, and *Habichuela con Dulce* is a drink that is consumed on holy Friday” (Angelina, Anayris, Ileana). These dishes are not associated with the Dominican culture, like many other things, but are in fact not only typical for this religion, but more even for this country. As mentioned before the Dominican cuisine in a whole is seen by no one as of particular interest. Dominicans as well as tourists are not very enthusiastic about typical Dominican food. “Only the *Platanoas* (peasants) eat typical Dominican food: rice, beans, plantain and other heavy foods. I am lucky I can eat a little lighter, more varied and more expensive foodstuffs like meat and fish” (Cori).

What sets apart the Dominican cuisine are not only the dishes and foodstuffs, but more the preparation methods. “Dominicans use a lot of seasoning and herbs in their food. If you serve a Dominican a steak with only salt and pepper they would send it back, too plain. Dominicans also don’t eat raw a medium rare food like ceviche, sushi or rare beef steak, because they are afraid to get sick if food is not properly cooked. Dominicans cook everything very thoroughly, to make sure it is safe” (Ileana). On a side note, most Dominicans don’t like spicy food. Spicy sauce will be on the tables in a restaurant on occasions, but “the food never will be spicy, that is not what Dominicans like” (Kenia, Ileana, Anayris).

Next to the distinguished flavoring and preparation methods, also the style of eating with Dominican food is different than in other parts in the world. In Italy for example food is very delicate; plates are made up like little pieces of art and different courses are served after each other, on different plates. Dominicans like to make a lot of food, put it all on a big table and have buffet styled meals. Everybody can choose what they like, and there is always enough for everybody. Because there are many different dishes everybody can choose what he would like to eat. This style of eating could be seen as typical Dominican or Caribbean/Creole and could serve as a powerful asset to reinforce ones identity, but in practice this is not often seen. This Dominican styled food is on occasion also served to tourists, but in most cases this is not pointed out to them: “when tourists go on an excursion they will be served a Dominican buffet. It is called “international food” in many cases because the cooks add some burgers or hotdogs, but in most cases it is food all Dominicans would eat, and it is prepared in a Dominican way. The only thing is that nobody tells you. They want tourists to feel safe, and not give them the idea that they will get something to eat they don’t know.” (Mr. R.). This strategy might be good for business, but it does not reinforce pride in Dominican localized identity, and does not give the people reason to be proud of what they have to offer.

Why Dominican people and especially people from Sosúa do not offer their own food to tourists or even pretend it is not Dominican food when they offer it, could be seen as strange. Why are these people not proud of their own cultural assets? Is this because they don’t value themselves, or because there is not want for it from outside? In the next part I will investigate the influence of “the other” on Sosúans. How do other people influence their choices in live and the way they see themselves?

## 8.5 OTHERS IN SOSÚA

Many people in Sosúa like to think that all the changes in their town have had little influence on how they act, what they choose to do and how they think about themselves. Especially in eating habits this is the case: “I cook the same things as my mother and she cooked the same things as my grandmother. Only the people who live here and come from somewhere else eat different things, but not us Dominicans” (Anayris). Another example is “fifty years ago people cooked the same

dishes as nowadays. The only thing that is different is the preparation methods which took more time in the olden days, and had more fresh and natural ingredients” (Ileana). The same women told me this however: “young people eat everything: chips, coca cola, fries, you name it. Older people eat less fat and more healthy” (Anayris) and “Young people tend to eat more fast food, bread, cornflakes, sandwiches, juices and sodas” (Ileana). This implies there have been changes over time, and the younger generation has a different food pattern than the older generation. Moreover, these changes are not random. It seems as though the new substances in the diet of the younger generation has many western influences; influences that could be caused by globalization, or by the presence of hundreds of western tourists in town.

I’ve have been told by many people form Sosúa that they don’t change and have not changed due to the different people that have come to live in Sosúa over the last decades. With the Haitian immigrants there might be some truth to that. Because of the hostile relationship Dominicans and Haitians have always lived in separate spaces, and interacted as little as possible with each other. “The Dominicans do not offer their food to the Haitians, and the Haitians not to the Dominicans. That is just a cultural habit; there is nothing else to it” (Ileana). Apart from the comments that it is just a cultural habit and not something stemming from a long relationship of hostility and racism, it shows why there are not many Haitians influences to be found in the local cuisine in Sosúa.

Tourists however have since the beginning shared the same space with local people, and they interact all the time. This might be why there are so many western elements apparent in the diet of younger and richer people. The claim that “the only thing the tourists changed about our food is the prices which they made skyrocketing” (Cori, Kenia) is therefore debatable. Many western foodstuffs like cornflakes, bread, hamburgers and spaghetti have made their way into the normal Dominican diet (seen by all informants when they told me about what they would eat on a normal day).

The fact that foreign influences seem to be more apparent in the Dominican cuisine than Dominican elements in the food of foreigners has some complication about how Sosúans perceive themselves. Feelings of inferiority could come from things like: “La Bandera (the national Dominican dish) is not good enough for tourists. Seven out of ten people show no interest in Dominican food what so ever. The other three mainly want to eat Dominican food because it is cheaper than “international food”, not because it is typical from this area” (Cori). Although these numbers are more a representation of his feelings than the results of an in-depth research, it shows that it hurts the people from Sosúa that tourists show little interest in their food. These feelings of inferiority might be why they do not offer it to tourists in an active way. If you don’t expect people to like what you have to offer, and especially when it is as personal as a piece of your own identity, it makes sense that people keep it to themselves, to avoid humiliation and rejection.

## 8.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have focused on how cultural and specifically gastronomical identities are used as a commodity in Sosúa and other places and what motivates people to do this. I have talked about the influences of others in this process. In the case of Sosúa the influence of guest workers from Haiti was not very apparent in the local (food) culture, but tourists have had an enormous effect on local life in Sosúa and have not only shaped the physical aspect of town, they have also had a big influence on how people from Sosúa have come to think about themselves.

Sosúans, being confronted all the time with people who are in a more privileged position than themselves, have grown to have an ambivalent idea about tourists. “Although I rely on tourists with my restaurant, I don’t like them a hundred percent. Yes, they bring in a lot of money, but with this money they attract crime and prostitution and drugs business and drive up (food) prices” (Cori). From my own experience I can tell that many Sosúans have a slightly or more pronounced hostile attitude towards tourists, and do not show the generosity and hospitality they show each other to tourists. “Dominicans share everything. Especially in poor neighborhoods people share everything without keeping track of who took more and who gave less. If somebody has a little rice to spare, he will give it to his neighbors, and from somebody else he will receive some beans; that is no problem” (Charlotte).

It makes sense that the potential cultural pearls of Sosúa are not shared with these strangers who are not trusted. A person's culture and heritage is a part of him, a part of his identity, and in a climate of distrust, this is not easily given away. Although I showed that Sosúa has much more to offer than just beaches and snorkel sites, there has to be a feeling of pride from the people, and respect from the receivers before something delicate like a cultural or gastronomic identity will be put up for sale. In both the case of Argentina and Norway can be seen that local people were encouraged to sell their local culture by the receiving end. In the case of Argentina the local dish was already there, but was praised by everybody which made it possible for it to grow to the current proportions. In the case of Norway people even asked for this dish to be cooked for them, and that is the reason for this dish to come back on the menu for real. If there will be no interest from others for Sosúa's cultural or gastronomic capital, people will not easily see the need to try and sell it to them. To avoid rejection and humiliation it seems safer to just offer pizza, palm beaches and cocktails. Maybe *la Bandera* will gain popularity with tourists in the future, when more people get excited by it, and Sosúans can be proud of their own culture.

## 9 CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have explored the processes that are involved in the forming of a gastronomic identity and what influences these processes. I have argued that a gastronomic identity is at the same time a reflection of and an influence on people's personal identities. I also argued that how this gastronomic identity is displayed or used is part of a complex process of reflexivity on the self in relation to the other in a constantly changing world. In eight different chapters I have highlighted different aspects that are involved in this process. I have looked at the complex history of my research site in which identity forming has always happened within a process of creolization and domination of one or another party. This has made identity processes in a Caribbean town even more complex than in other regions in the world where shared histories go back for centuries.

For my research I have used anthropological research methods such as participant observations and in-depth interviews with people with whom I had built a personal bond. My special position as tourist/researcher made it possible for me to go undercover as a tourist and have people treating me like they would any other tourists, being able to experience in this way the dynamics between tourist and local first hand.

To get a better understanding of identity processes I explored the current debate in the academic world on this subject, finding out that there has been a shift in the consensus. From seeing an identity as a fixed concept that is given to any person at a certain moment, it has been perceived as a social construct that is constantly challenged not only by a person himself, but also by others. Recent perspectives on theories of identity in a postmodern society even states that role models and existing influences on the forming and reforming of identities are shaking. This has to be put in the perspective of a timeframe in which nothing turns out to be as it seemed, and every certainty has to be reevaluated. Constructing a gastronomic identity in these uncertain times is not easy, and using these identities for profit is an even trickier challenge in postmodern times, especially in a country that does not only have a history of colonization and domination, but in a town that is built by complete foreigners. Sosúa is a young town that was only built shortly after the Second World War by Jewish immigrants. A few decades later most of these people were gone again, leaving Sosúa with the challenge to reinvent itself. A short period of peace was broken from the 70's onward, when the town was flooded by national and international tourists who were interested in the nice beaches, partying and drinking, and real interest in the local community was never shown. It is not a surprise to find in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that this town does not show a clear identity. Everything revolves around pleasing tourists and meeting them in their needs. The need for bars and restaurants caused for the beach to cram up with tiny bars and eating stalls, but also the demand for prostitutes led to a thriving prostitution business that has a prominent place in public life. There is no focus on local culture, may it be from the local industry (dairy and fishing), or from cultural expressions of the local inhabitants like art and handicrafts. Replicas of a distilled idea of Taíno art are the only tangible expression of what ones was supposed to be local culture.

Although there are not many expressions of local culture or a local identity, Sosúa and his people have a much bigger cultural capital than is expected.

Reviewing Sosúa's gastronomic identity is not made easy, because there is not much emphasis put on the subject by most local and foreign people. This could be different I argued, when the people from Sosúa start to promote their local food culture and regain confidence and pride about it in the process. There are enough local dishes to be found that sets them apart from those available in other parts of the world, they only have to be put in the spotlights.

The fact that typical local food is not highly validated is because it is believed to be food from the lower classes. People from the higher class do not want to be associated with food that is beneath their standards, which often results in the disregard of the own cultural habits. People from the higher classes tend to choose to spice up their diet with components from the more western cuisines, and also in the younger generations this trend is visible. As I argued these choices have little to do with blindly copying the behavior of admired groups, but with consciously combining elements from different sources to create a new identity. This new way of identity forming could also be used to make a combination with local peasant food and some more expensive, but still local goods, to give it a somewhat higher status. In this way local food could become something from all Sosúans, not just the poorer working class.

I have also argued that it is not easy to promote a local culture - even if it is highly validated by its own inhabitants - when the people who are supposed to be interested in it, are not. The kind of tourists that come to Sosúa have always been only interested in relaxing and being spoiled, options that are offered by all-inclusive resorts, and tourists who like exploring new places have had nowhere to go in Sosúa. Slowly the whole town has adapted to the needs of this specific kind of tourists, making it harder for Sosúans to sell their cultural heritage, and at the same time leaving no opportunity for tourists who would be interested in that to visit the town.

To get back to my main argument, I will have a look at how this argumentation could be implemented on Sosúa. It is clear that Sosúa's gastronomic identity is a reflection of the population's own feelings of being insignificant, unimportant in the eyes of the tourists and of their own government. By tucking away their gastronomic identity, Sosúans tuck away their own selves, putting the tourists on a stand where they would like to be themselves. Having this insignificant gastronomy has reinforced the idea with many Sosúans that their culture is of little value and their heritage and identities are insignificant. "The other" plays a bigger part in the identity forming of Sosúans than in many other parts of the world, looking at the dominant position of the tourists in the lives of people from Sosúa. Globalization and the rapid changes and modernization have been a further strain on these people, for whom it has never been easy to figure out who they are and where they belong.

In short it could be said that the Sosúan gastronomic identity is a reflection of the Sosúan people and has its influence on how the people see themselves. The way in which Sosúan people have

decided to use and display their identity has largely been influenced by the presence and demand of tourists and has shaped the way these two groups currently interact with each other. In the end it could be said that you are what you eat, but even more that you eat like you are, like you were and like you once will be.



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