Consuming and Certifying Quality Alta Qualità and Food Choice in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of the term *alta qualità* across two third-party certification (TPC) realms. TPCs assure that foods have certain qualities such that they are sourced within a national boundary, reduce environmental damage, or promote healthy living. In Europe, many TPCs support the economically and socially significant sector of artisanal foodways. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Milan, north Italy, the article provides context to understand how, when, and why *alta qualità* is uttered. Relying on the pragmatic economic sociological theory of qualification, I show that *alta qualità* is an important way to signify that a food is good, but this does not always mean it is consumable. For those institutionalising qualities, *alta qualità* signifies elements of taste, marketing, and organisational structure.

KEYWORDS

Food certification, halal, high quality, qualification, Italy

The purpose of third-party certifications (TPCs) – like kosher, halal or organic – is to minimise controversies about the permissibility of foods being moved, usually successfully, outside of the context in which they are produced. In a sense, TPCs attempt to make the manufacture of material things equally accountable. Being accountable, or having the obligation to report or justify an action, is ‘part of the general fabric of human interchange’ (Strathern 2000: 4). Beginning in the financial audit world, social scientists have shown that institutional forms of checking are becoming more ubiquitous, demonstrating a cultural shift away from a sole emphasis on interpersonal trust systems. This shift has been termed ‘audit society’ (Power 1999) or the reliance on institutional forms to reduce risk. Checking is a balance between too much surveillance and a lack of oversight (Power 1999: 1–2).

However, checking in the food sector differs from checking in the financial world because food is not the same as documents; food is consumed, making it a material that is both sensory (Stoller 1989) and structural (Mintz 1986). Authors have successfully investigated both

these sensory aspects and structural features in the anthropology of food. For example, drawing on structuralism championed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, David Sutton (2010) argues that food is a metaphor for underlying social structures, which can be expressed through sensory experiences. Put another way, we experience the world through our senses, which are moulded by social and cultural systems. With the 'sensory' materiality in play we can show that, say, tastes are subject to change and analyse the cultural factors that perpetuate ideas of 'good' or 'bad' flavours. Sydney Mintz (1986) gives perhaps the most famous example of thinking with materiality and structure. In his book *Sweetness and Power* (1986), he argues that the sugar industry was not just the result of a human desire for sugar but the result of larger political and economic transformations such as colonisation, slavery, and industrialism, which in turn created desire for the commodity. Following these works, I also combine the materiality of food with the structures – economic, political, social – that create bonds, support community, and even help some succeed politically.

Beyond the emphasis on structure and material, those currently studying organic and craft food systems have also focused on the co-production of food consumption through narratives, networks, and notions of time and space (Grasseni 2013; Koensler 2018; Pétursson 2018). I am similarly interested in how values circulating about what is consumable affect relationships between consumer, producer, and certifier. Specifically, I am interested in exploring the 'importance of transparency as a moral imperative and ordinating principle' (Koensler 2018: 57), by asserting that forms of checking, specifically in the case of TPCs, mean to provide clarity, broadly conceived, through similarly instituted means.

Other works presented in this journal have centred on the encounter between the materiality of production on the one hand and the management and creation of it on the other. As both Marianne Lien (2020) and Frida Hastrup (2020) have shown through their case studies in Scandinavia, tensions arise in managing agricultural production as a natural resource. Indeed, managing landscapes as resources speaks to both how 'nature' and 'resources' are made and unmade. Similarly, I argue that the work my interlocutors do influences their personal judgements of the food they consume and vice versa. As such, forms of checking in the food certification realm are not *just* processes, but a way in which landscapes, people, and food cultures are made and unmade. In other words, deeming a food certified made in Italy or halal is not the only outcome of the process. The values

produced do something akin to ‘moral re-appreciating’ the past in conjunction with the modern present (Thiemann 2019: 26).

Checking is a modern form of reassurance for consumers that has value through its implementation. In this article, checking refers to the cultural-scientific tools, devices, and procedures used to marshal a cohesive world capable of being checked. I move away from what theorists have called ‘audit society’ or ‘audit cultures’ (Power 1999; Strathern 2000) because the audit is only one space of many in which qualities are produced; audits are only one tool in the toolkit. Instead, I use the term ‘checking’ to expand this process beyond the audit and to the food sector. Checking, which is made legible through the certification label, also speaks to local forms of trust, standardisation, and concerns, all of which are worked out in practice, as those involved in TPCs navigate local concerns as both institutional actors and consumers. This article investigates two forms of TPCs in Italy: halal and made in Italy, to address the importance of the local relationships, narratives, and spaces in the daily work of checking.

My research focus on TPCs in the halal and made in Italy realms prompts a question critical to studying our modern food system: what qualities do people use to evaluate a food as consumable? This question is further complicated because what is ‘consumable’ is not only changing but is also being expanded. For example, in the case of halal in non-Muslim majority countries, certified foods can be found in more places, while, at the same time, those foods considered halal are being expanded beyond cuisine in community enclaves. Similar to mainstream foodie culture, young Muslims in many contexts want to consume foods ranging from sushi to hamburgers (Armanios and Ergene 2018: 239–242). As these choices become many, so too do forms of justification in deciding what is consumable (Lever 2020: 90). I show that the term, *alta qualità* is one such justification, specific to the Italian context. In the case of halal food in Italy, this is a particularly relevant question to those studying European foodways, where quality claims (e.g. heritage, craft, artisanal) are not only socially powerful but also make economic capital for producers and marketers relying on the correct forms of value claims (Medina 2009; Cavanaugh and Shankar 2014).

Two interrelated elements of TPCs are clear: quality cannot be made inherent to a product, and, as a result, a food with a TPC label is evaluated based on various criteria that are beyond the individual consumer (Harvey, McMeekin, and Warde 2004: 192). In this article, I argue that halal certification is embedded in the values produced by

the made in Italy certification milieu. This is unlike any other halal certification context investigated by other scholars (e.g. Allam 2008; Bergeaud-Blackler 2004; Bergeaud-Blackler, Fischer and Lever 2015). I focus on two different sites within the same national context to show that those involved in TPCs use the same justification, *alta qualità*, to meet different ends.

Sites of Inquiry

In 2015, I began working and conducting ethnographic field research on the halal food certification realm in Milan. In 2017, I returned for a full year of research, collecting the data that comprise this article. During this time, I attended trainings, talks, audits, and religious events. I also carried out semi-structured interviews, and I held a focus group with young Muslim-Italian consumers. In addition to collecting data through these discussions, I spent ten months as an unpaid intern in two certification sites: Halal Italia and Food Italy. As a native English speaker with experience translating Italian-language materials, I gained fairly uninhibited access to each institution's daily workings. I worked approximately forty hours a week in Food Italy and Halal Italia, which translated to about two to three days a week at each site. My hours increased if there was a need, such as a deadline, an event, or an important meeting. In addition to translation, I also helped with marketing campaigns and office organisation.

During my time at Food Italy and Halal Italia, I quickly found that they followed similar certification procedures, even though their values differed; Food Italy deals in place-making rhetoric while Halal Italia promotes Islamic values. Yet, institutionally, they are organised the same way: both entities work on a three-year timeline, at which point certifications expire, and they both implement annual audits.

Through my entanglement in daily work life, I found that the established culture of made in Italy products was a powerful force in shaping the Italian halal industry today. I quickly noticed that the halal sector was dealing and trading in the allure of made in Italy products. That is, halal in the context of Italy is not only about the circulation of global Islamic values but also embedded in the value made in Italy products have across the globe. This article attempts to disentangle how unseen elements outside of traditional transactional studies of capitalism (such as trust, community, identity, and gender) are leveraged and brought to bear on these transactions (Bear et al.

2015). Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to how local food industries and histories influence labelling operations across more than one institution in the same context. This comparative approach is a key methodological component and opens up the opportunity to examine local commitments across religious and non-religious lines. I provide more background on the two comparative cases in the next section.

Halal Italia and Food Italy

At a broad level, halal denotes the proscription of blood, pork, and carrion.¹ Halal certification in Italy has developed dramatically in the last ten to fifteen years. The halal sector is primarily used for export; rarely do certifications certify foods for in-country consumption. Often an Italian producer has ties with an intermediary in a Muslim-majority country. In order to ease product shipment restrictions through customs, the intermediary will ask that the producer seek halal certification.

Much of the development of the halal industry was due to the involvement of Italian government officials. For their part, the Italian government saw an opportunity to establish halal certifications as a way to get Italian products into new markets, thereby strengthening the economy. In 2009, the Ministry of the Interior sought out a community to begin a halal label to help ease the path for Italian products into markets abroad in Muslim-majority countries. The ministry created a pilot project providing advice and funding for a community of Muslim Sufi converts to start a halal certification. As such the development of halal in this context is inseparable from an export economy.

The pilot project eventually became the certification known as Halal Italia and it remains one of the most important players in the European halal certification sector today. By the time of my study in 2018, Halal Italia certified approximately 150 products across a number of sectors including baked goods, flavourings and food ingredients, coffees, ice creams, and meat products. This parallels a recent article that showed that in 2019 the most popular Italian exports to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) were Italian baked goods and dairy products ('Gulfood: Why Made in Italy Matters' 2020). Italy is well-known as a producer of these foods and so it is little surprise that the halal industry would also certify products in these sectors.

Similarly, made in Italy certifications cater to a foreign audience and, as such, the Italian government has been heavily involved in its development. Historically, much of this oversight was the result of a notorious wine scandal that killed twenty people in the 1980s. Although none of the tainted Italian wine was exported, many countries refused to import Italian wine until the Italian government provided more oversight (Henry 1986). Since the scandal, the Italian government has set regulations and guidelines regarding the health and safety of exported foods.²

In addition to the proliferation of regulation, the Italian government is involved in supporting what anthropologist Elizabeth Krause identifies as the myth of continuity or the historical sentiments unproblematically used to produce value (Krause 2018). Although Krause applies the myth to Italian fashion, there are also parallels to Italian craft foodways. Like Italian fashion, the government seized an opportunity to build an economy around the idea that Italian food has always existed since time immemorial, and that ‘Italians’ have always eaten crafted, artisanal foods. Halal entities exporting Italian products are also greatly influenced by the imagining of Italian food, which has both social and economic value.

With similar regulations, standards, and governmental intervention it is little surprise that structurally both entities look similar; both have introductory trainings, both work on a three-year timeline, and both perform annual audits. Yet, despite the Italian government’s influence in building both industries today, government oversight is limited to health and safety in the two sectors. This is unlike other certifications such as organic, which requires government oversight in all stages of production.

Conceptual Framework

To untangle larger questions of social bodies, order and individual action, I focus on the term: *alta qualità* (high quality).³ In Italy, deeming a food *alta qualità* is one way my interlocutors determined if a food was ‘good’. For example, one day during lunch, a Halal Italia colleague, Fatima,⁴ and I were walking to the post office when she pointed and said, ‘that’s our butcher shop’. I looked over to see that the shop was dark and without any indication of it being ‘halal’. Through the darkened window I could see a white countertop with empty glass cases. I may have confused the scene for another of type of store if

it weren't for the cured meats hanging from hooks in the window. I asked Fatima,⁴ whether the butcher is a Muslim. She responded that he isn't but that he has *alta qualità* meat and sources halal meat for the community.

In addition to evaluating whether something is consumable, there are also limits to deeming something *alta qualità* in Italy; although it remains an important device used to evaluate institutional certification and personal food choices. For those involved in both certifications, I show that *alta qualità* plays a role institutionally and helps entities decide if a food can be certified in the first place. I want to highlight that although the term is the same across the two entities the evaluative practices differ. As authors Giseline Kuipers and Thomas Frassen (2020: 145) explain, '...reality is often local and limited'. While both certifications engage with and sell to a global audience, beliefs about quality are not universal. Emphasising the procedural aspects of 'quality', this article will also illustrate how qualification can operate differently within the same context across two different realms of certification. I argue that *alta qualità* is not just a mirror of larger institutional processes, nor a purely individual endeavour, rather, it is a moment of encounter framed by both.

To think how evaluations of food can order such encounters, I find ideas about distinction especially fruitful. Michele Lamont (1994) shows that ideas about taste differ across classes in France and the United States, producing codes for how to classify others (what she calls 'symbolic boundaries').⁵ She is interested in the 'nature, content, and causes of the subjective symbolic boundaries that can potentially frame, channel and limit people's lives' (Lamont 1994: 174). I argue that *alta qualità* is similar to a code; a way people use devices such as *alta qualità* to frame their choices. People make decisions based on codes and the cultural resources afforded to them. Put another way, devices frame action, but they do not determine it. People evaluate whether a book, a piece of art, or a food is a 'good' version, based on many aspects including their positionality, access to cultural resources, and personal commitments. Fatima's choice to use a non-Muslim butcher speaks to this. She deems the meat *alta qualità*, yet this choice is certainly partially a result of her location; the area she lives in is gentrifying quickly, and so, it is rare to come across a Muslim butcher in her neighbourhood.

Pushing this process further, pragmatist economic sociologists focus on justification, or put simply, how actors justify their actions (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot

show that justifications speak to ‘economies of worth’ or differing values that support a claim. Values are framed by repertoire, which are flexible forms of justification used in various situations. To explore repertoires, economic sociologists of this school have focused on qualities and how people justify what is a good something. For example, Frank Heuts and Annemarie Mol (2013) ask: What is a good tomato? By foregrounding qualities, the authors show that asking this particular question can shed light on the practice of qualification. By evaluating a tomato as good, tomato experts are also performing and valorising their own practices to increase the value of their tomatoes. Huets and Mol expand evaluation to valuing, which demonstrates the ‘varied ways of performing “good tomatoes”, from assessing and appreciating, to adapting and improving’ (Heuts and Mol 2013: 130). The jargon here matters only a little; what I want to highlight is that *alta qualità* is not just a form of evaluation but also an avenue through which workers in the two certification industries perform a good version of a material food. I extend this to focus on the encounter of quality both in and outside institutional realms.

The process of valuing qualities is not only performative but shaped through and across cultural histories. For example, Susanne Freidberg (2010) shows that ‘freshness’ is a concept that has changed over time and in relation to new technologies like refrigeration. Technologies, such as refrigeration, affect how people understand ideas like freshness and rural food production more broadly. As anthropologists have shown, technologies such as refrigeration allow for producers engage in competitive capitalism by producing more while at the same time partaking in political projects that promote the appreciation of rural life and work; marrying this pre-technological age imaginary with modern life (Thiemann 2019; Paxson 2012).

Alta qualità also connects ‘modernity’ with the political project of valuing rural production because it is attached to the best foods in Italian food law. The term is often associated in Italy with geographic indications (GIs). GIs link a product to a particular region, indicating qualities, attributes, and a certain reputation associated with geographic origin. Examples of GIs include the Italian protected designation of origin (DOP; *Denominazione di Origine Protetta*), which can be found on balsamic vinegar from Modena, San Marzano tomatoes, and Italian olive oils. *Alta qualità* is also associated with legal distinctions of artisanal craft food products in Italy.

Enough theorising; let’s look at how this plays out in the ethnographic examples.

Institutionalising *Alta Qualità*

The morning began chaotically at Halal Italia. One of my colleagues, Fatima, fielded a call from a Sicilian company that wanted a halal certification. After Fatima explained the halal certification process, they responded angrily. Fatima exclaimed: 'We don't doubt your product is *alta qualità*'. Her assurances were met with shouts on the other end.

After, Fatima was a little shaken. She turned to those of us in the office and said, why do producers think, just because we make them go through a certification process, we think their products are not *alta qualità*? Although at first this was meant to be a rhetorical question, it spurred a discussion about the need for oversight. The women in the office used this time to speak about a company in Naples that did not pass an audit as a result of too 'many little things', such as 'eating on the line of production'. It soon became clear to me that the company's failure was about a lack of interest in managing halal lines of production. My Halal Italia colleagues explained that the common refrain from those who fail an audit is, 'But my product is *alta qualità*'.

For non-Muslim producers, *alta qualità* categorises a product as a material like halal, which does not need halal TPC oversight. The logic here is that they already care about their product so they should be granted a halal certification. The fact that producers use *alta qualità* says something about how non-Muslim Italian producers justify their claims, performing their product as *already* of value. Producers who fail the halal certification process believe this utterance has weight when communicating with Halal Italia staff. However, this justification does not convince Halal Italia staff, who respond by saying the quality of the product is not the issue; indeed, they don't 'doubt' the *alta qualità* of the product. In the absence of a halal certification, *alta qualità* stands to merge failing an inspection with the perceived high standards of production that may or, as is often the case, may not follow halal guidelines. In the Italian case, *alta qualità* is used as a way to make judgments about a product outside of procedure. For Halal Italia staff, *alta qualità* does not designate a product as halal, while for some producers it does. Interestingly, Halal Italia staff see value in using *alta qualità*, encouraging the use of term in marketing strategies.

For halal certifiers, a product's *alta qualità* should be emphasised in the marketing strategy, as made clear when I went to a halal training for an ice cream producer. The training course began with definitions about what halal is and how halal standards should be implemented. The last part of the session focused on marketing products with halal

certification. During this part of the session, one of my colleagues, Haroun, showed the example of a certified halal salami company who had decided to make a new brand for their halal line of products. He urged the workers at the training to stay away from stereotypes, adding that marketing should be based on the *alta qualità* of the product.

To Haroun, marketing halal products should be simple. Yet, in many cases the labelling is anything but. One such example Haroun shared was a picture of a packaged Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. The small package of cheese included five labels: the Italian protected designation of origin, an 'aged for over twelve months' seal, made in Italy with the Italian flag, Halal Italia's certification label, and a label confirming that the company is part of the local Parmigiana-Reggiano cheese consortium. When I asked Haroun about this on our car ride home, he told me that the packaging showed that it was a quality product. In this case, labels can also perform the value of *alta qualità*.

Differing from the Halal Italia example, in the case of Food Italy, *alta qualità* could actually bridge the gap where a certification did not exist institutionally. This was made clear to me when I participated in an event to showcase Food Italy in May of 2018. The event was called 'Compliance Day' and drew hundreds of people working in the certification industry. For the event, my supervisor and I were to staff a Food Italy booth. We all went to the event space the day before to help set up the booth. I took this time to talk through what I should say the next day when attendees asked about the Food Italy certification.

'Food Italy seeks *alta qualità* products and selects them for you', my boss explained. I nodded and wrote down the sentence, ready for an onslaught of thirsty conference goers as we were going to be handing out wine for a tasting. To make sure no one drank too much on an empty stomach, we put out *taralli*, small rings of dough the size of a pretzel and a common snack food in Italy.

The next day, with my words written on a slip of paper, I confidently asked if I could pour wine for the rush of people between sessions. While pouring and explaining the notes of the wine, I overheard a curious epicurean talking to my boss: 'I like these *taralli*. Do you all certify these too?' 'Yes', she responded quickly. After the woman left, I turned to my boss and expressed my surprise. I didn't know we certified *taralli*. In fact, I was the one inputting all of our products into the e-commerce site, and I had never seen them.

She laughed and said that they were *alta qualità* from a local grocery store chain. In this case, *alta qualità* meant intentionally deceiving potential consumers. My supervisor knew we did not certify any

taralli, but because they were designated as *alta qualità*, we *could* have certified them; conveniently collapsing two categories. Quality can be exaggerated to keep up the imaginary that is held by the person asking about the certification process. Armed with *alta qualità*, my boss at Food Italy could make claims of certification with little worry.

Alta qualità not only has different meanings but also performs different ends for all of the people involved in the certification process. For non-Muslim producers, it is a failed justification that does not hold weight for those at Halal Italia. For Haroun, *alta qualità* is an important avenue to valorise a product through marketing. For my Food Italy supervisor, *alta qualità* means she can tell a fib to conference attendees. *Alta qualità* illustrates one form of valuing in the local context. By using it, people qualify their world and their place in it.

Consuming *Alta Qualità*

Before going to Milan, I saw myself as a scholar interested in food certification. In my mind this was absurdly black and white. Halal or haram.⁶ Made in Italy or made elsewhere. What I began to notice, not just in the institutional realm but in everyday consumption practices, was a reliance on the vague. As I was struggling to find a binary, my friends and colleagues were maintaining the grey to varying ends. *Alta qualità* was one such way consumers were doing this.

For example, one evening two young couples at Halal Italia with whom I was close, invited me and my husband for dinner. We ate at the house of Fatima, who, at the time, was about five months pregnant. To save her from having to play host and cook a large meal, her husband offered to pick up burgers. Confused, I asked where the meat was sourced to see if it was halal. Her husband responded that the meat was *alta qualità*. When I asked what he meant by *alta qualità*, he said that because the animals are treated well, the burgers are allowed. I tried many times to find out if the meat was certified halal. Calling and stopping by the chain restaurant and asking another community member, but I could never get a clear answer from either the company or my colleagues. I learned that this was not really the point. The point was that through the category of *alta qualità* the beef was consumable.

However, this does not mean all foods deemed *alta qualità* are necessarily consumable. One night, I went to an iftar⁷ that Halal Italia members were attending as part of their Islamic community. The iftar was hosted by a Catholic group. The event began around 8pm. When

I arrived, I saw Ali carrying trays of meats from a restaurant that was next to the Catholic church. I asked if I could help, and he pointed to the many meat trays stacked high in the bar. I grabbed one, not quite realising just how much weight it was. After stumbling, I was upright and moving quickly towards the church following Ali along street-lights, misty with rain. When we arrived, I sat next to another Halal Italia colleague and her son. We began to eat after prayers by the Catholic and Muslim leaders. The trays carried from the bar included prosciutto (pork), bresaola (beef), and a few vegetarian options.

The Muslims in the room ate none of the food. When I asked my colleague, Alia, why she was not eating the non-pork cured meat options, she replied that while they were *alta qualità*, she worried about contamination. The pork was produced in the same place and likely came into contact with the other foods. It was important that Alia categorised the food as *alta qualità*. She likely did this so as not to insult the Catholic community because she was not eating the food offered. A refusal to eat a food, along with an annunciation of this act, can broadcast the host as a bad one, similarly, what a host chooses to serve can also communicate a great deal, as Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes (1986) found out during their fieldwork in Niger. When their interlocutor, Djebo, serves a less than edible sauce, Stoller and Olkes realise that she is communicating her dissatisfaction with the gift they had given her (341). In a similar way, what the Catholic community served also communicated something, namely, that they were unaware of my colleagues' dietary proscriptions. Despite this, Alia remained unphased, calling the meal *alta qualità*, so as not to offend. The Catholic community members may have been bad hosts, but the Muslim community members were not bad guests.

Issues that arise in non-Muslim spaces did not only occur with Halal Italia staff. In an interview, a young Italian-Muslim, Mohamed, brought up the issue of ethnic butchers found primarily in my neighbourhood of Milan. He explained, 'Butcher shops are *not* places of *alta qualità* because they are going for the lowest price'. For Mohamed, price was also an important indicator of the *alta qualità* of meat. In response, I asked if he knew of any Italian-owned butcher shops that sell halal meat. He replied that they 'would not have halal meat. Their audience is Italians. Wine is also sold'. At issue with Italian-owned butcher shops is not the quality of the meat but the association of wine in these spaces and, therefore, possible contamination. This example shows that *alta qualità* can also be missing from spaces and that the places that lack *alta qualità* are risky.

Food Italy staff similarly used *alta qualità* to decide on foods. Food Italy staff applied the term and a lack of it to foods during an audit of a high-end restaurant in Milan's famous Galleria Vittorio Emanuele. The restaurant under inspection specialised in Milanese cuisine. After an intense morning session going through the documentation of all of the restaurant's food, we were told to order lunch. This, too, was an element of the inspection. My colleague, Chiara, told me to order *ossobuco*. The hearty dish is a specialty of Lombardy and comprises braised veal shanks. Because the lunch was part of the inspection, she told me it was important to taste it.

After the day-long inspection, which the restaurant passed, Chiara told me 'The *ossobuco* was not *alta qualità*'. She felt that some of the raw ingredients might have been frozen. I agreed and asked, 'Then why was the restaurant certified?' She responded, '[the restaurant] followed the rules'. Although Chiara did not believe the restaurant's food to be *alta qualità*, it passed the inspection anyway. Indeed, local consumer categories and evaluations differ from the aspects that become institutionalised.

When I asked my colleagues at Food Italy what makes a product worthy of certification, they answered with two elements. First, company structure. When I asked them to expand, it became clear that the producer needed to have a good system in place to show that they implement the rules of the certification appropriately. This is similar to the importance of the emphasis of good protocols in place for halal certifiers. Through structure Food Italy could deem a company worthy of certification. For Food Italy, the second element was taste. As I was told, taste should be used to determine quality. This claim was always in the context that personal relationships do not trump taste. However, taste is subjective, so when taste is deemed not *alta qualità*, structure is invoked. 'They followed the rules', responds Chiara.

In the case of consumption, *alta qualità* is simultaneously a category and an evaluation. This category is not static and often changes depending on three elements on the consumption side, first, context. As the example with the Catholic community shows, the context of contamination cannot make an *alta qualità* food halal. Second, places can change whether something is deemed *alta qualità*. Mohammed warns me about 'ethnic butcher shops' that are not, on the whole, imagined as places of *alta qualità*. Third, institutional evaluations in both cases cannot be based only on this category. Even though Chiara thinks the *ossobuco* is not *alta qualità*, the restaurant is granted certification.

Concluding Remarks

Alta qualità indexes a haziness that develops from stark boundaries – halal or haram, made in Italy or not. In the past, anthropologists have focused on how food sustains certain identities, be they ethnic, socio-economic, or racial. Yet, *alta qualità* moves away from food as solely identity-affirming or community-building. It indexes something else. The use of the term points to the registers people use to navigate their food choices daily. The term also highlights important elements in building an institutional pattern. For example, my Food Italy boss in the case of the *taralli* sees *alta qualità* as having weight even though it is not known whether standards have been met.

For halal certifiers, *alta qualità* is used to urge companies to move away from stereotypes circulating about the Islamic world. During the training on halal that takes place before the audit, there is already an understanding that the food product is *alta qualità*. By simply beginning the certification process, certifiers believe there is a certain high-quality level of production. However, *alta qualità* has its limits. Some companies believed that their *alta qualità* products meant they did not have to go through the halal certification process. Through *alta qualità*, certifiers, producers, and consumers make assessments about food products.

Certifiers pronouncing *alta qualità* engaged with procedure in varying ways. For Food Italy, a perceived lack of *alta qualità* foods means a restaurant can and likely will still receive certification. Of course, *alta qualità* also means different outcomes to different people. For Chiara, the food at the high-end restaurant was not *alta qualità* even though they had met all of the requirements necessary for certification. Along with certification procedures and subjective elements, *alta qualità* signals a material as possibly certifiable. At the extreme end of this continuum, *alta qualità* can nullify procedure in favour of convenience, as seen in the case of *taralli*.

Evaluation is multiple and points to the many values certifiers and consumers draw from in their daily work and social lives. The use of *alta qualità* points to various frames encountered through food. The process of qualification through the use of *alta qualità* positions certifiers and consumers as drawing from similar registers. It is in the encounter between varying uses of *alta qualità* and subsequent consensus that the term is translated into value.

In addition to exploring qualification through the use of *alta qualità*, I would like to highlight that the cases explored here also promote a methodological position. I urge social scientists who focus on TPCs to incorporate a comparative methodology, centring on local food culture as key to building institutions that deal in the global exchange of foodways. We must begin to incorporate comparative frames across ethical projects. Make no mistake – my call is not meant to equate projects, but rather to better understand the differences across projects. By encouraging this comparative methodology, I mean to highlight the ways participation in capitalist endeavours reinterpret local cultural institutions for global aims. Through this project the distinctiveness of life in Italy comes to the fore. It is only through a local comparison that we can fully engage with the particulars, adding to how certifiers remake and value many aspects of their lives beyond institutional ventures.

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Notes

1. Alcoholic beverages are also forbidden but this is more complex. There is a discussion of the harmful effects of wine (*khamr*) in the Qur'an. The surah that prohibits wine was likely revealed only a few years before the Prophet's death, even though previous discussions of wine were generally positive. Through the Islamic notion of abrogation (*naskh*), all previous interpretations of wine as consumable were nullified.
2. Regulation surrounding craft foods has steadily increased. Players like Slow Food, Eataly, and consortiums of producers create lengthy rules about what can be considered a 'true' product. This surge in oversight and self-policing has also borne a reactionary movement against labelling in Italy, which is fiercely local and community driven. The movement is based on solidarity that cannot be replicated in the institutional setting of food production nor provide a place for oversight. For more information read Koensler 2018.
3. I leave the term *alta qualità* in Italian. *Alta qualità* can be roughly translated as high quality but also has connotations of 'high end'. *Alta qualità* is not just used in everyday conversation but is also used in the Italian food sector, more broadly.
4. All names included in this article are pseudonyms.
5. Michele Lamont draws on the seminal work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) who theorised that agents internalise the class structure (a type of symbolic boundary) and that motivates action. Taboos are an especially good example of how symbolic boundaries are created and sustained (Douglas 2002). For example, by not consuming alcohol, Muslim adherents both distinguish themselves from other religious groups and create a shared identity. Authors have also applied the notion of symbolic boundaries to how racial and ethnic identities are sustained today (Barth 1998; Horowitz 2000).
6. Haram means forbidden.
7. Breaking the fast during the holy month of Ramadan.

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