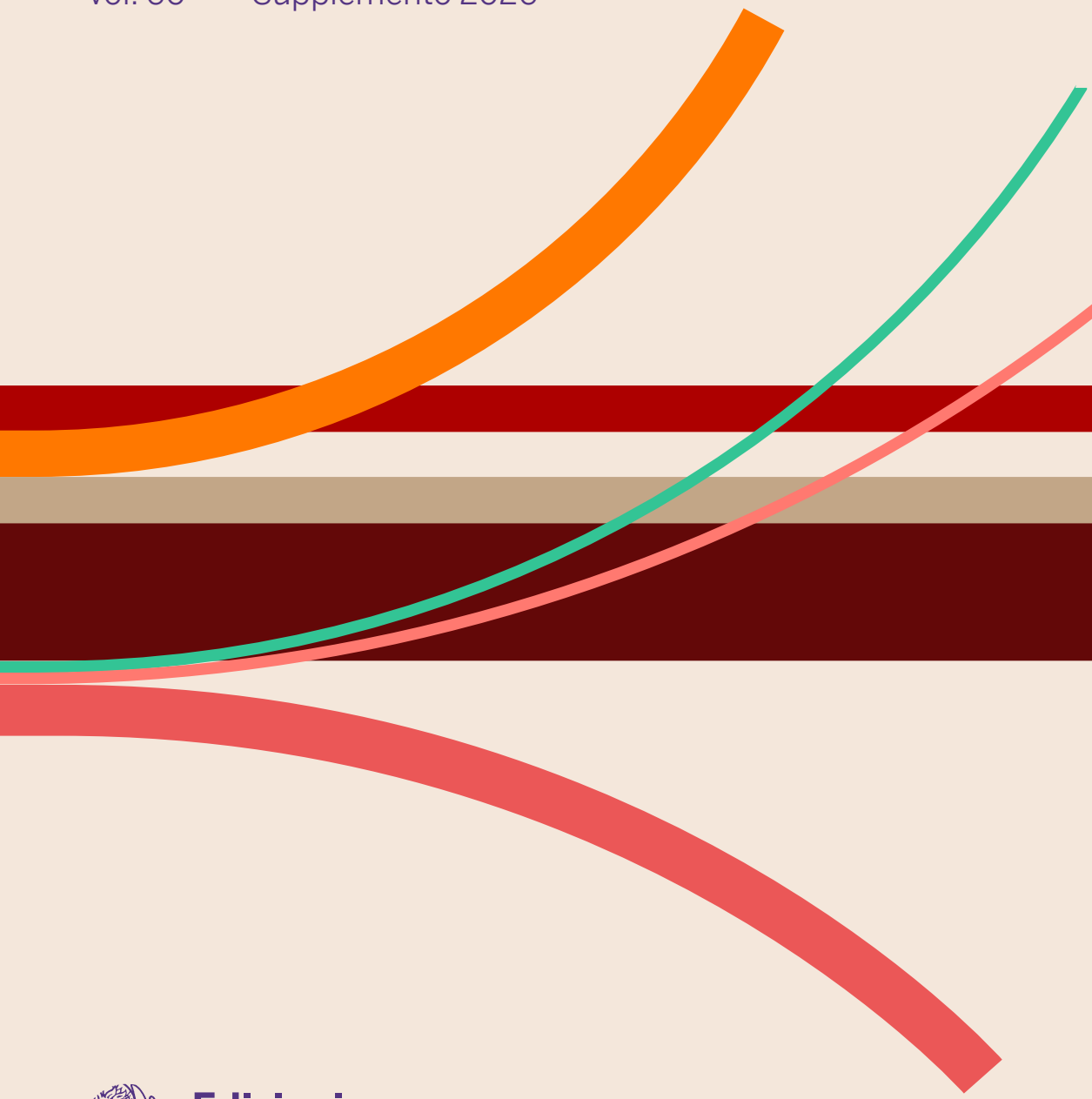
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Abstract

This special issue explores how food discourse constructs cultural identities, ethical values and consumer practices across institutional, commercial and digital contexts. Through corpus-assisted, critical and multimodal discourse approaches, the contributions examine representations of traditional and novel foods, from Italian culinary heritage and gastronationalism to alternative proteins and sustainable consumption. Together, they reveal how language and visual communication negotiate authenticity, health, innovation and responsibility, shaping contemporary food cultures and perceptions of what constitutes desirable food.

Keywords Food discourse. Cultural identity. Multimodal communication. Food marketing. Sustainability.

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edited by
Daniela Cesiri, Michele Sala, Stefania M. Maci

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Edible narratives. An Introduction

Daniela Cesiri, Stefania M. Maci, Michele Sala

1 Food Discourse and Culture: Interconnected Multimodal Narratives

Food functions[1] as a complex semiotic system of cultural values, social practices, and ideological representations through which societal meaning is continually constructed and negotiated (Montanari 2006). Biological survival provides the foundational necessity for eating, but human societies have transformed food as a means for mere survival into a whole set of meaningful practices through which multisemiotic ritual and symbolic systems become the expression of communities around the world (Counihan, Van Esterik 2013). In food studies, edibility and naturalness are not fixed biological attributes; rather, food items acquire meaning through shared cultural consensus within a given community. What one culture views as a staple delicacy, another may categorize as taboo or inedible, demonstrating that human appetite is mediated by historical context, institutional structures, and discursive frameworks (Montanari 2006).

Analyzing institutional, corporate, and consumer communication through Critical Discourse Analysis, for instance, reveals how food narratives reinforce or challenge dominant power structures,

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market hegemony, and socio-cultural identities. Language does not merely describe food: it actively constructs what food represents to the consumer. When regulatory bodies publish dietary guidelines, when corporate campaigns launch new products, or when digital communities debate ethical choices, they engage in discursive practices that establish norms of taste, safety, and morality (Cesiri 2025). These communicative acts rely on underlying cognitive models that structure how individuals perceive health, risk, and tradition. By unpacking these texts, researchers can observe the subtle mechanisms through which economic interests and cultural ideals align to shape everyday consumption habits.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis further reveals how non-verbal cues, such as visual design, color theory, and spatial arrangement, combine with textual language to redefine boundaries between the human and humane. In contemporary media, food is rarely presented through plain text alone. Modern food communication spans packaging, social media imagery, video advertisements, and digital interfaces. Symbolic meanings embedded within these visual and textual modes frame food in diverse ways: food as medicine, food as art, food as high technology, or food as a moral duty. These figurative constructions guide consumer sentiment, transforming physical products into carriers of complex sociopolitical ideals (Chen, Eriksson 2019).

Ultimately, the study of food discourse provides a vital lens through which to observe societal transformations. As environmental degradation, supply chain instability, and demographic change place increasing pressure on global food systems, the ways we talk about food become crucial battlegrounds for competing visions of the future. Linguistic choices determine whether technological interventions are welcomed as sustainable solutions or rejected as unnatural distortions. By grounding the analysis of food in established theoretical frameworks of discourse and culture, scholars can better understand how public perception is shaped, how resistance is mobilized, and how cultural traditions adapt to an increasingly complex global landscape.

2 The Socio-Cultural Dynamics of Traditional vs. Novel Foods

The interaction between traditional and emerging food choices creates a dynamic conflict in contemporary foodscapes. On the one hand, traditional foods carry deep historical resonance and are bound to specific geographies, culinary techniques, and community memories. Regional culinary traditions and iconic national foods, such as specialized productions of certain territories, and traditional dishes, act as key signifiers of collective identity, local heritage

and, therefore, authenticity (Graham 2014). These items are often protected by legal classifications and regional designations selected to preserve cultural heritage against industrial dilution. The discourse surrounding traditional foods emphasizes continuity, ancestral wisdom, and an intimate connection to the land, constructing a narrative where eating is an act of preserving history and affirming communal belonging (Counihan, Van Esterik 2013; Graham 2014). These traditional foodways frequently resist, co-exist, or are even altered by globalization dynamics such as standardized mass production and institutional protectionist discourses often termed gastronationalism (Ichijo 2020).

On the other hand, novel foods present a distinct set of communicative and cultural challenges. Novel foods – ranging from insect-based proteins and plant-based meat substitutes to cellular agriculture and lab-grown products (Patinho et al. 2021) – challenge standard gastronomic paradigms and regulatory standards. These products disrupt established categories of what constitutes real or authentic food. Where traditional food relies on history to establish legitimacy, novel foods rely on scientific innovation, environmental urgency, and ethical progress. However, introducing these technological innovations into the marketplace requires navigating deep-seated consumer anxieties regarding artificiality, safety, and cultural disruption (Domaneschi 2024).

Marketing and media discourses surrounding novel foods have to actively counteract consumer neophobia and pervasive stigmas associated with technological intervention in the diet. Indeed, when novel foods are perceived as unnatural, consumers often express disgust or hesitation (Tuorila, Hartmann 2020; Günden 2024). To overcome these barriers, marketers construct narratives where choosing novel foods does not mean compromising on taste, comfort, or social enjoyment (Pozharliev et al. 2023).

3 Perspectives from the Special Issue: Integrating Communicative Perspectives

Against this background, contributions within this Special Issue investigate how culinary narratives reflect and shape modern cultural, ecological, and ethical trends across various communicative perspectives. Together, the papers collected in this Special Issue aim to analyze the mechanisms through which public institutions, commercial brands, digital communities, and media platforms narrate the foodscape emerging from the intersection between traditional and novel foods. By examining diverse communicative domains, this Special Issue offers a comprehensive look at how

discourse mediates the relationship between consumer values and food production methods.

Moreover, the Special Issue also considers institutional and protectionist discourses, shedding light on how governmental bodies and agricultural associations frame food-related policies. Analysis of official policy documents and public campaigns reveals a frequent conflict between health-oriented risk prevention and protectionist gastronationalism. While public health authorities focus on safety regulations, dietary guidelines, and disease prevention, agricultural lobbies often emphasize local heritage, economic sovereignty, and national pride. These competing priorities lead to distinct discursive strategies, where food policy is framed either through scientific risk management or through the defense of local cultural identity against external influence.

Other papers focus on corporate glocalization and modern market messaging. Global brand communications must carefully balance localized traditional heritage with contemporary demands for corporate social responsibility. Major food corporations frequently adapt their marketing strategies to resonate with regional cultural norms while maintaining a unified global identity. In doing so, they construct narratives that highlight sustainable sourcing, community engagement, and environmental stewardship. This delicate balancing act demonstrates how commercial entities utilize discourse to maintain consumer trust in an era marked by heightened scrutiny over industrial supply chains and corporate ethics.

The emerging market for alternative proteins forms another central theme within the collection. Research in this area explores how plant-based and cultivated meat brands market ethical luxury and sensory indulgence, reframing alternative proteins as desirable lifestyle choices rather than sacrificial alternatives. Complementing these commercial perspectives, studies on digital platforms investigate how online communities debate and negotiate the moral acceptability of novel practices like cellular agriculture. Furthermore, multimodal analyses of social media content reveal how visual narratives contrast traditional tourism imagery with ecological themes, while corporate marketing strategies work to de-stigmatize novel proteins such as edible insects.

4 Overview of the Special Issue

The papers collected in this Special Issue are specifically organized as follows. Opening the issue, **Stefania Maci** and **Michele Sala** analyze Italian institutional and sectoral promotional discourses, contrasting the Ministry of Health's risk-preventive framing with the agricultural association Coldiretti's protectionist rhetoric of gastronationalism. **Daniela Cesiri** expands on corporate branding strategies by examining how global companies balance localized culinary traditions with global corporate social responsibility disclosures, taking Nutella® as a central case study of glocalization.

Shifting the focus to alternative protein markets, **Gianmarco Vignozzi** utilizes a corpus-assisted approach to explore how plant-based and novel meat brands reframe ethical eating as a 'guilt-free indulgence', merging luxury with consumer morality. **Elena Mattei** applies multimodal corpus analysis to Instagram tourism reels, examining how host communities construct authentic, plant-conscious relationships with food in contrast to traditional tourist representations. **Francesco Nacchia** investigates online vegan discussions surrounding lab-grown meat, uncovering how digital discourse negotiates the ethical and philosophical boundaries of whether cultivated cellular products align with vegan principles. Finally, **Walter Spezzano** and **Stefano De Cantis** use Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS) to analyse how 137 Italian restaurant websites in Miami discursively construct 'Italianness'; to do so, they study the official websites of Italian restaurants in Miami. Their findings reveal that these websites transform food into a symbolic medium for identity, collective memory, and cultural continuity within multicultural digital food discourse.

Across these diverse cases, the contributions included in this Special Issue explore how traditional and novel food marketers employ competing tropes of naturalness, authenticity, and humaneness to capture consumer trust and shape our future of eating.

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