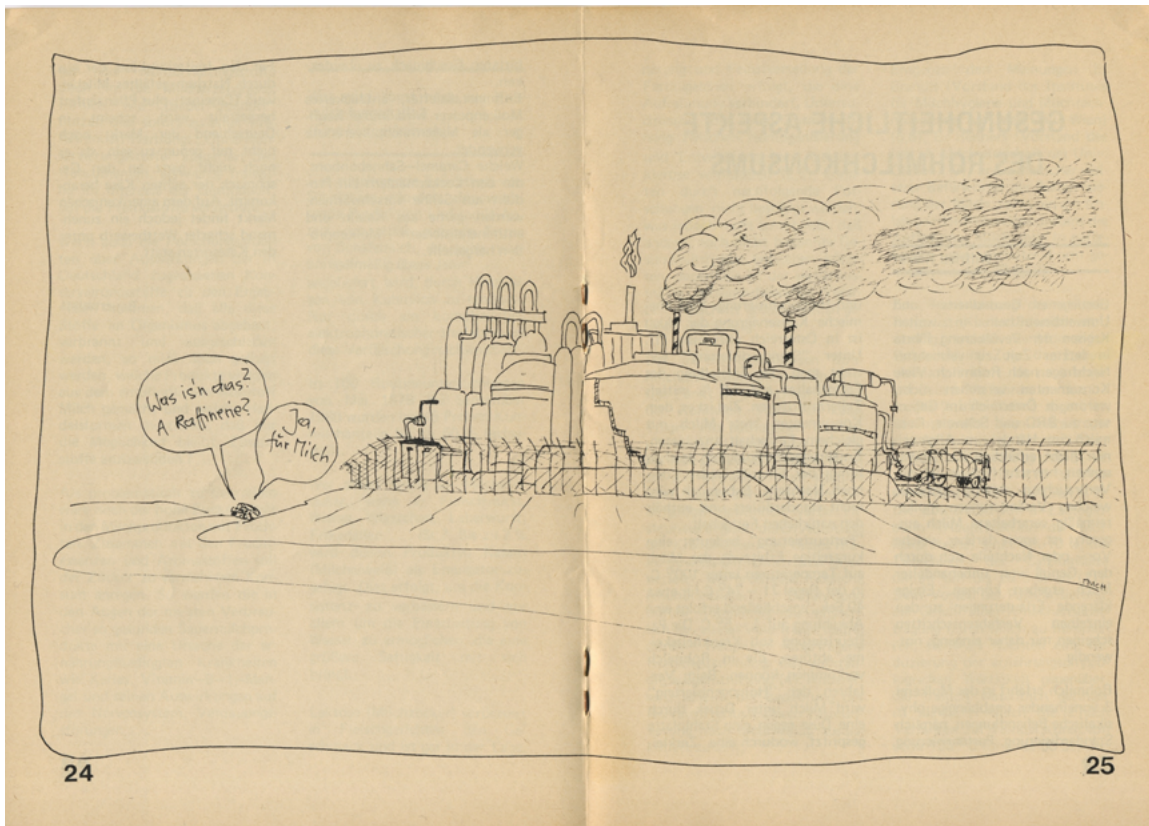


Foodways: An Introduction

Matthäus Rest and Dolly Kikon

Industrialized food is dependent on modern infrastructure for its production, processing and distribution. On its way from producer to consumer, the food that ends up in our kitchens is often transformed beyond recognition, and it moves on a global scale. In their introduction to *Limn's* issue on food infrastructures, Bart Penders and colleagues (2014) reflect on the difference between catching a fish and buying fish fingers at your neighborhood supermarket to drive home this point. Modern food often undergoes complete deconstruction and reconstitution before it arrives in our refrigerators, even if the products we purchase seem natural and straight from the farm or the sea. In the documentary film *Das System Milch* (2017), Aart Jan van Triest, head of marketing at the Dutch multinational dairy cooperative FrieslandCampina, proudly proclaims “We are from grass to glass,” and continues by comparing his company to an oil refinery, because a dairy plant transforms a single raw material into a vast array of products that “magically come out.”



This comparison is not particularly novel. As early as 1982 the Austrian cartoonist and farmer Much had the same insight – albeit in rather a less triumphant reading – when he drew a dairy plant and had his characters say: “What is this? A refinery?” – “Yes, for milk.” Many other agricultural products serve as raw material for the food industry in similar ways. They are broken down into their chemical compounds and nutritional building blocks; new products are created through the recombination of these parts. Whether something is lost in the process or if healthy nutrition is nothing more than the right ratio of nutrients remain active questions in nutritional science and beyond.

*“What is this? A refinery?”
– “Yes, for milk.”*

Source: Much 1982.

Many cosmologies – Indigenous and otherwise – believe that there is more to food than the sum of its parts. The Yamphu Rai of Eastern Nepal, for example, refer to the “essence of grain” *charawa*. This is what makes your belly full. When *charawa* is lost, you will eat and never satisfy your hunger, and the rice won’t last you through the winter (Armbrecht-Forbes 1995: 70). Across Northeast India, accounts of food and community are intimately tied to belonging, care and sovereignty (Deka et al. 2022). Today, the movement of foods as commodities and cultural artefacts rests on infrastructure, a concept that encompasses physical and social networks. In this issue of *Roadsides*, we think through such cosmologies alongside the infrastructure that moves food around the world, and ask: how do foodways and their socio-cultural-cosmological scaffoldings and infrastructure condition each other?

Where the analogy between oil and food breaks down is the fact that many foodstuffs spoil quickly. This time sensitivity makes the relations between food and infrastructure particularly complicated and unequal, as those who control the systems for moving and processing food have exorbitant power over those who produce it. Before the invention of modern infrastructures, many raw foodstuffs had to be processed quickly, in relatively small batches, close to the point of origin. Across the planet and for millennia, people have come up with a host of different methods to transform these into forms that are stable, often for years, and therefore storable and tradeable over long distances.

In peasant societies, such preserved foods have often been important as emergency provisions. In the earlier times of Jordan's Wadi Feynan, nobody left for the deep desert without a dense ball of *jameed*, the local form of heat-acid coagulated cheese whose basic recipe is applied in modified versions all over Eurasia, from *ricotta* to *chhurpi* to *aaruul* (Reichhardt et al. 2021). Dried meat has served a similar function in many regions – different preparations and recipes include Borts in Mongolia, Pemmican in the North American steppes, Sukuti in the Himalayas, or Speck in the Alps. While such strategies helped diversify food supplies and increased food sovereignty, industrial agriculture and the integration of food production into global commodity chains has turned many farming communities into decentralized food factory workers dependent on grocery stores to feed themselves. Since processing has largely been concentrated in those factories, most farmers neither have the skills nor the equipment to turn their harvest into stable products. They are thus extremely dependent on the regular collection of their output.

The relations between food and infrastructure invite us to dwell on the circulation of goods and their attendant power networks. On resource frontiers around the world, infrastructures that allow the movement of comestibles such as tea and cash crops are facilitated by militarized structures of power. Tracing the nexus between market, capital and violence, we are interested in the way infrastructure both delivers and distracts from our knowledge of food production. Historian Jayeeta Sharma (2011) draws attention to the instrumentalized violence of the railroads that delivered tea from the frontiers of South Asia to ports like Kolkata and London. Non-industrialized forms of food production, on the other hand, rely on very localized materials to engineer the transformation of vegetables, meat and fish. Artisanal practices of curing, fermentation and pickle-making expand the notion of infrastructure to include social and cultural relationships and practices.

While co-editing this issue, Matthäus and Dolly reflected on their respective food journeys. They met at the Wenner-Gren symposium on Cultures of Fermentation in 2019 (Hendy et al. 2021). This convergence allowed them, along with fellow participants, to consider food traditions and the process of farming, standardization, industrialization, food processing and sustainability. Matthäus came to the anthropology of food through his upbringing on a dairy farm, his work as a cheesemaker on Swiss alpine summer pastures in his twenties (Rest 2021) and his involvement in the international peasant movement La Via Campesina. At the time of the symposium, he was working with a transdisciplinary group of biomolecular archaeologists interested in the early history and contemporary condition of dairying microbes in Mongolia and the Alps. For Dolly, the context of Indigenous food cultures, foraging and non-industrialized forms of



fermentation led her to explore different food movements including the seed- and food-sovereignty practices in Northeast India (Deka and Kikon 2024). Her ethnographic approaches serve to ground community history and how Indigenous assertions in the Eastern Himalayas are integral to understanding contemporary political movements in the region (Kikon 2021).

Heritage rice grains at the Annapurna Seed Library, Meleng, Assam.

Photo: Dolly Kikon, 2025.

The contributions gathered in this collection all deal with the relations between food and infrastructure. The authors offer different ways to understand infrastructure as a form of engagement, care, and as an ongoing process. They address the linkage of local foods with global flows, the logistics of eating, how the state and borders change food, how food makes and shapes communities, and how growing food interacts with questions of autonomy and dependence. In her photo-essay, Fizza Batool investigates how the Karakoram Highway has made family granaries obsolete. Dwelling on the fish trade in Sri Lanka, Meghal Perera draws our attention to the infrastructure behind the cold chain, and how this determines local understandings of freshness, flavour and quality. André Thiemann's essay extends this conversation to the Serbian raspberry industry and explores how value and communication constitute infrastructure. Sarah Rogers scrutinizes pesticide infrastructure and the production of food in Australia to reveal how food production is complicit in the global circulation of agrochemicals.

Uttam Lal and Mirza Zulfikar Rahman focus on chhurpi, a preserved cheese, to examine the infrastructure of mobility, governance and connectivity in the Himalayan region. What these contributions highlight is the integration of local food production into global economies and flows and their far-reaching ramifications.

The second photo-essay, by Tuomas Tammisto, looks at plantation infrastructure in Papua New Guinea and how this intersects with the food that plantation workers grow for themselves. Writing about Jewish community cookbooks in the United States, Joanna Radin and Mark Stern consider these projects as material infrastructure of kin-relations, ethnic linkages and community. Vanessa Lamb and Zali Fung argue that food preparation in the Thailand–Myanmar borderland works as infrastructure of solidarity and community building during anti-dam protests. Inditian Latifa demonstrates the ways in which stories of lost marsh rice varieties in Indonesia reveal how crops, floods and memory expand the meaning of hydrological infrastructure. Finally, in the third photo-essay, Carlotta Molfese illuminates multispecies assemblages as infrastructure in Italy, where living mulch affords farmers a strategy to care for their land and livelihoods. These articles all address questions of community and belonging connected to food and its production.

Garo women traders selling foraged bamboo shoot at the Pillangkaka Market, Meghalaya.
Photo: Dolly Kikon, 2024.



What these various contributions show is the value and importance of an understanding of infrastructures that goes beyond their technical properties – these are much more than complex structures that simply move things. Rather, the articles employ a compellingly wide definition of infrastructure that includes community, kinship, memories, social connections, and things like pesticides, Indigenous rice varieties and community cookbooks. For decades, the term *foodways* has been used in food studies and beyond to account for the multifaceted relations between food, culture and identity – how the things we eat condition who we are and how we understand ourselves in relation to the world and to others. In line with the general thrust of *Roadsides*, we understand the term to focus on the ways food needs infrastructure to come into, move through and be in the world. And in revisiting Elizabeth Fisher's (1980: 59) claim that the "earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products," we might argue that this has been the case throughout human history.

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