#293: Fare enough: Concocting an aura of authenticity in traditional food products

VOICEOVER
This is Up Close, the research talk show from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
I'm Elisabeth Lopez. Thanks for joining us. On today's episode of Up Close we explore food authenticity or truth in food. Are we really eating what we're led to believe? We all want our food to be what it says on the label, for it to be safe, clean and unadulterated. Then there's a whole other dimension to authenticity, where food meets emotion. But when we go on that Palaeolithic diet, or we buy that jar of pasta sauce with the sundrenched Tuscan farm on the label, are we looking for authenticity in all the wrong places? What can the quest for authenticity tell us about ourselves, our social class and the country we live in?

Our guest on Up Close is Ken Albala, professor of history at the University of the Pacific in California. Ken is the author of more than a dozen books on food, with a special interest in the food of early modern Europe and the renaissance. He's now researching how European producers have over the past 50 years created an image of food that is small, local and authentic. Ken is a visiting scholar at the School of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Melbourne. Ken, welcome to Up Close.

KEN ALBALA
Thank you for having me.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
In this day and age we're saturated with TV cooking shows, cooking publications and tourism food destination marketing. Is food authenticity a recent concern?

KEN ALBALA
It's not a recent phenomenon. I think whenever you're trying to sell a product you will market it as best you can and I think every food comes with an image. Even when they first sold tea in Europe they had an image that this was something very elegant that they drink in Asia and Europeans went crazy for it and paid a lot of money. So
it's not necessarily a new phenomenon but we've gotten much better at marketing and finding out what people want exactly and labelling things so as to deceive them sometimes into buying something even though it's really not - for whatever that word means - authentic. Sometimes it truly isn't, sometimes it's a complete lie.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
You've observed that even though we're really concerned about food authenticity these days, we're cooking much less than usual. What's happening there?

KEN ALBALA
Well that's a very strange phenomenon because I think the more we have become obsessed with food and watching it on TV and reading about it and looking at cookbooks and food personalities appear everywhere, we are cooking less and I think it's sort of like sports in that the more we watch it, the less we do it. Like sex also, it's this weird phenomenon that we have become observers. I think communication specialists note that we've become passive about things and although we like food, the actual numbers of hours spent on preparing food, in the US it's gotten down to I think it's something like 23 minutes a day in total food prep and eating and everything. So clearly people are just buying convenience food, they're eating out, they're getting takeout and that sort of things. It's a bizarre phenomenon, I admit.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
You've talked about gourmet moments in history; tell us a bit about those. What do they say about us and how cyclical these passions about food can be?

KEN ALBALA
Well the gourmet moments happen usually at moments of great civilisation, when it's at its height. You see great art, you see philosophy blossoming, you see even material culture in general blossom. I think it has a lot to do with the fact that people when they have money like to splurge obviously and show off their money. When elites like to invest in objects they often do buy rare and exotic food and whatever. But the phenomenon is especially in stratified societies where you have lots of people just below them who are aspirational and then they can start to buy those same goods, it suddenly loses its clout and then the people at the top have to reinvent themselves. So I think that's what drives fashion and change in clothes, in food, in architecture and in periods when you see a lot of social mobility you find that people will often reinvent themselves at a much quicker pace. Obviously nowadays it happens every decade or so, you find a new fashion has come in and in cooking, think of how brief the whole phenomenon of the whole molecular gastronomy movement was. It had this flash with Ferran Adrià and a lot of people imitated him and some pulled it off correctly and some not, but it's gone now, I think it's just ended. It's because when you can buy a sous vide machine and the alginates to make your own little beads of any kind of liquid, when you can do that at home what's the big deal? Why would you go to a restaurant and spend $500 for an expensive meal? So it's always keeping one step ahead of the middle classes and the nouveau riche and anyone who can afford it or even begin to understand it, then
you've got to reinvent yourself. So now the new thing is of course foraging and home fermentation. Machines are still there but they're not quite as thrilling as turning back the clock to traditional methods of cooking.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
You do a bit of home fermentation yourself and I think one of your experiments was with an eggnog that had been lying around for a year. What is the attraction to you in the preservation techniques that pre-date the refrigeration era?

KEN ALBALA
Well it's partly historical interest and I want to know what people did. Obviously most human beings, whoever lived on earth, lived without a refrigerator and they didn't kill themselves. In most of the world people still do make it and they just have different preservation methods, things like Lactobacilli that will bring down the pH in vegetables, you can store them, or in preserving grape juice as wine or flour as bread. Those are all ultimately - they taste great but they're also really good preservation techniques. I think how I got into it, I think it's partly a dare; I like to challenge myself, I like things to be difficult and dangerous in the kitchen. If everyone is doing quick, easy, convenient and mediocre, I want to see what will happen if it takes a year to make soy sauce. So I did it and it was not the best I've ever had. I might do it again, but probably not.

But the eggnog was really a challenge and the funny thing is when I have something on the shelf that I am really not so comfortable about drinking myself, I throw a party, everyone gets drunk and I say hey, let's try this and people do it. This happened at New Year's, literally it was more than a whole year and I pulled out this jar of eggnog and everyone was like wow, this is great. It got really thick also, which was kind of bizarre, because it has raw eggs in it and cream and alcohol and spices and things like that. Everyone was taking it and drinking it down and I think there must have been people at this party who really didn't know what they were eating, because next they were like I can't believe you gave me that. I said look, no one's dead, right? The truth of the matter is that the alcohol completely kills all pathogens and I found a study online that said that when you make eggnog fresh it's got more germs than if you leave it around for a year with that much alcohol in it.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
Let's get back to, I guess, your academic interest in Europe. Is the concern and the legislative framework and all the marketing around designation of origin foods just an EU thing, a European Union thing, that's happened over the past 50 years, or does it go back further?

KEN ALBALA
Well that kind of labelling is very new and it's since the EU decided to get into the branding business, they have I think succumbed to political pressure of certain groups and manufacturers who have consortiums and things like that can pressure them to get various statuses that are denomination of origin, sometimes of quality, sometimes that they're using traditional methods. In general those are very random and arbitrary, I think some of the ones that get designation just happen to be
because there was one person who was willing to campaign to get it done and there are many other products that don't.

I think the irony of the whole situation is that some of those products that really get attention and are marketed well and sold abroad, anything that's traditional about them is ruined as a result, because they end up ramping up production and they end up cutting corners and doing things that are definitely not traditional. In a way that I think this is a classic dilemma. For anthropologists, if they go into a place and they see a civilisation that is unspoiled, well the moment you look at it, you've spoiled it. You show up and then you're an external observer and they start tampering whatever they're doing to satisfy your expectations. Then when you sell it elsewhere and market it, it's clearly become different; it's a different product. You can't make things by hands and mass produce them, those are mutually exclusive. Now, it doesn't?

ELISABETH LOPEZ
There just aren't enough grandmothers in the world, are there?

KEN ALBALA
That's right and it doesn't necessarily mean you have to compromise quality, but it does change the product ultimately. So I said something last night at the talk that I'm going to have to record somehow, but it was that if you see on the label handmade, artisan, traditional, authentic, it's a good assumption that it's not.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
So if we were looking at a label on one of these products, instead of seeing some lovely olive groves, [we should be] seeing steel vats and a big warehouse out on some suburban fringes somewhere?

KEN ALBALA
That's right and I think why not embrace that, why not recognise that a product can still be very good and not be made on a hillside by a troll. It's just face the fact if something's mass produced it's got to be in a factory. It's partly because the EU itself has quality and safety standards, especially let's say you're making salami, they have inspectors on site, they have certain protocols of how you make those things. In a weird sense, if you were to go back 100 years, every little household would be making it slightly differently. They'd have their own local mould, they would have a completely original product and that's disappeared. Once you have health and safety standards and HACCP and all that stuff, you have to make a homogenous product. So the irony of the regulations is that we assume we're getting this whole plethora of a wide range of traditional ingredients from localities, when in fact we're getting a very homogenous product.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
So I guess these sorts of labels make it easy to be a food snob, but if you really take what you've just said into account and refuse to be fooled by the marketing, what are you left with if you're looking for a really good experience that's authentic? Or it does not exist?
KEN ALBALA
Well I think actually drop the whole search for authenticity. I think if you're a food snob you're going to get what you deserve, which is something labelled and misleading. I think people should look for quality and that can only be determined by your tastes, not by what people expect, not by the price, not by whatever it says on the label. A perfect example is wine. If you go into a store, you can find extraordinarily expensive wine that is perfectly mediocre and you can find plonk in a jug that is okay and drinkable and there's no pretension to it. Of course there is a form of reverse snobbery which says I'm not going to pretend to do that, so I'm going to drink the cheapest beer, or I'm going to show my affinity with the working class by drinking something really ordinary.
That is a different kind of distinction. It's not one based on money because if anyone can afford that really expensive bottle of wine, you have to reinvent yourself so it does become the local and the organic and the sustainable and the artisan and whatever descriptor you want. I think that the interest in those kinds of products goes in cyclical waves, I would say every 20 years or so people turn away from the highly mechanised, super-modern, chemistry-laden and advanced food, then they say well maybe we've lost a lot of very interesting things and they go back to the traditional. I think if you go back in food, certainly to the '70s, much of what was happening then, it's like a repeat.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
There's a generational aspect to this, isn't there? You've observed that with, I guess, a lot of families who migrate to the States or Australia or the UK, who come from quite a defined traditional cuisine, the next generation just wants to lose it. They want the cheese in a spray can and then it gets rediscovered by the third generation.

KEN ALBALA
That's exactly right and I think for immigrant communities, the most fascinating thing - and this works with language also - is that the first generation who comes over does eat the same way that their parents did and they dress the same way and they still speak the language. The generation after assimilates and they do want to speak - they don't want to look like foreigners like their parents and they start eating hamburgers and everything else. My dad is a perfect example of that. When you get to the third generation, someone wakes up one day and says wait a minute, what was my grandmother cooking? What was in that pot? I want to be able to cook that again. So that's me; trying to figure out what my grandmother - my grandmother died when I was 13, so I didn't get a chance to write down any recipes or anything, but I've reconstructed a lot of what she did that no one else knows how to cook in my family now except for me.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
Such as?

KEN ALBALA
Well, there's something called kopita and there's boyos, is maybe the best example. This is a Spanish word, because my grandparents' family going back about 500
years lived in Spain, they were kicked out and they ended up in Greece. So a lot of
the words that they had for things were still in Ladino, a dialect of Spanish. So there
was this thing that my grandmother made that she knew I loved, which was basically
like a spanakopita. So it was spinach and feta cheese and eggs bound together and
instead of putting it in between layers of filo dough, there was like an oil-based
dough. So it was more like a pizza dough kind of thing, it was rolled out and it was
folded in this intriguing way so that it was a breakfast food. So you'd have this for
breakfast, that's what boyos means in Ladino.
I remember my father being disgusted at the fact that my grandmother used to
drizzle olive oil over the whole thing on a big tray and he just found that - he said
these are perfectly good, why would you ruin them by drizzling olive oil on it? My
grandmother was right actually, because when you think about it, you're trying to get
calories into people and the olive oil tastes good, but that generation of people in the
'50s, '60s, whatever, just thought olive oil was old world, disgusting. Now the olive
oil's really expensive and you betcha, I pour olive oil on it and it's fantastic.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
I'm wondering about the flipside of that quest for authenticity, where there's perhaps
an inverse snobbery, I suppose. I'm thinking about when Coca-Cola introduced new
Coke. They tampered with an incredibly successful 99 year formula and there was
outrage. There's still debate today about whether the company just got it really
wrong, or whether it was a superb marketing stunt.

KEN ALBALA
It was. I think absolutely, it was totally calculated. I've noticed that a handful of
companies are doing that now, is they will say there's a shortage of this really crappy
product on the market. This happened with Velveeta in the United States just about a
month ago.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
Can you tell us what Velveeta is?

KEN ALBALA
Velveeta is not really cheese, but it sort of pretends to be. So if you can imagine this
block of stuff that's made out of whey, which is the leftover of cheese, and sodium
citrate and then a little cheese thrown back in for flavour, the advantage of Velveeta
is it melts and it never separates. So you can put it on nacho cheese, you can do
anything with it, it's indestructible. So Velveeta suddenly said that they were running
short of Velveeta in various places in the country, so they expected to create a run
on Velveeta, because it's definitely something that people remember fondly, even
though it's grotesque. Well I was interviewed a lot of times about whether I thought
this was a real run on it and what did I think of Velveeta, and I said no, they made
this up entirely. Then it got me thinking how was Velveeta made, so I made some at
home and then I actually even went a step further and put it in a squirty can, you
know, squirty cheese, that kind of thing?

ELISABETH LOPEZ
I think you're the only person anyone's ever heard of who has squirty cans arrive in the mail from someone unknown and who actually would use them.

KEN ALBALA
Well, it was a fun experiment and it took me a while. I had to clean the kitchen several times after spraying the whole wall with it, but it worked. In fact the advantage of doing this is I'm not really technologically minded and usually people will call me a luddite because I don't like using modern technology. But I'm beginning to find that it's actually a lot of fun to play with and if you're using really good cheese to start with - I used a fantastic aged Dutch gouda and once I got the formula correct it was actually really interesting. So technology isn't necessarily all bad. I know people will hate me for saying that.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
I'm Elisabeth Lopez and you're listening to Up Close. In this episode I'm discussing food marketing and authenticity with Ken Albala, professor of history at the University of the Pacific in California.

Ken, in the United States, the UK and Australia we're used to immigrant communities transforming the way we eat with new ingredients and techniques, fusions, but in Europe there are countries that vehemently resist outside influences despite having significant immigrant populations. What's going on there?

KEN ALBALA
Well, we tend to be a lot more open-minded in places where there's a constant influx of immigrants and who bring with them their magnificent food. So if you were to go to a place like Stockton, where I live in California, the farmers markets there are Punjabi, Cambodian, Mexican, Anglo, there's just ingredients from all over the world and everyone buying it comes from somewhere else, which is exciting. Those ingredients get mixed into cuisines and it's not an intentional cerebral fusion, it entirely happens on its own volition, which is lovely and I think it's great. Korean food is now the big hip thing in California as well, but I think there are countries that are at some level really fundamentally xenophobic. The classic example is the town of Lucca decided that it would?

ELISABETH LOPEZ
In Italy?

KEN ALBALA
In Italy would protect its walls and not have any kebab stands or Middle Eastern food in the middle. Clearly this was because the Italians thought our culture is being diluted. But I think on the other hand they were also thinking when a tourist comes to Lucca they want to taste authentic Italian food, whatever that means, and that if we have Turkish shops in the middle of town, they're not going to go to Lucca, because they have to get on the train from Florence and they have a choice; is it Lucca or Pisa. That leaning tower trumps the kebab shops. So I think the reaction was much stronger than I think it ought to have been and I think it was ill-advised policy to start with, but intended for tourism but ultimately ended up being really racist, viciously so.
So I would say a similar phenomenon happens in other places in Europe and as long as there are right wing political parties that think that ethnic purity, whatever that means, is something to be protected in cuisine, then they will look down on foreign cuisines. I have to say, for Italian food as wonderful as it is, it's the thing that I cook most days of the week, Italians really don't like foreign food very much. They're not interested in anything strange. There are Chinese restaurants in Rome that are usually pretty bad, but I think in general Italians really want to eat their own food.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
Yes, outsider cuisines are relegated as the cheap and cheerful, possibly nasty alternative.

KEN ALBALA
That's right.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
You see that in Spain too, where cooking shows and cooking sections in magazines might absorb a few foreign ingredients from time to time, but the methods and the techniques remain essentially Spanish. It's quite interesting.

KEN ALBALA
Yes, sometimes that one of the ways the cuisine evolves, so I'm really not against that and I think sometimes an ingredient will show up in a place and people have no idea what to do with it and they end up processing it the same way. Let me give you a classic example, is when corn was made in Mesoamerica they would nixtamalize it, which means you soak it in lye, the outer coating comes off and it swells, so it becomes pliable and you can actually make a dough out of it, a masa, by rolling it by hand. Corn gets to - maize I should say for non-Americans, it gets to Europe and even gets to North America and people dry it and grind it and get cornmeal, so you can make things like polenta out of corn. It used to be made out of amaranth or barley or something like that. You get cornbread in North America, which is entirely an American invention. What people didn't realise is that you don't get all the vitamins that you do from the nixtamalization, you lose B vitamins and you really can't live on it. So in places like the American South and in Northern Italy, where they live on corn, they get pellagra and just nasty nutritional diseases because the ingredient went but the technology to process it didn't.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
There was that fascinating book by Margaret Visser, the anthropologist, on the role of - or the presence of corn in just about every food imaginable in the States.

KEN ALBALA
Yes, it is. There were two guys who did a great movie called King Corn and they had their - not their DNA, but some part of their body analysed and it turned out that they were mostly made of corn. Most of the molecules that were in them ultimately came if not through eating corn, then through eating animals that ate corn, through processed corn syrup, or corn starch additives or lecithin. So most Americans are
actually corn and soy and it's no surprise, that's what we grow. We subsidise it, we pay money for farmers to grow corn and soy.
I think the ultimate tragedy here is we have our first lady, Michelle Obama, is very keen on people eating more healthily and getting exercise, blah, blah, blah. What strikes me as really bizarre is on the one hand we have people saying don't drink sweet soft drinks with corn syrup and don't eat junk food and blah, blah, blah, and on the other hand the same government is sponsoring the subsidisation of those exact same products. So it's no surprise that that failed miserably and in fact she took that whole nutritional part out of her campaign, so now it's just exercise. Last week we saw the President and Vice President running around the Oval Office doing their exercise, but it said nothing about their diet, which was very sad, I think.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
Do you think the debate about industrial food versus, I guess, local artisanal food is getting quite polarised; big ag versus the good stuff?

KEN ALBALA
Well, it's always been polarised. Neither is really an assurance of quality. I think that you can have industrial food that is perfectly good and you can have artisanal food that's garbage. So just because it's local and made by someone, doesn't necessarily mean they know what they're doing. In general I would rather support a local economy, I'd rather buy directly from the producer so I can say wow, that was a great vegetable you grew and they get the pleasure directly from me as a consumer and if it's not good I can tell them. If I buy something that's been made 1000 miles away and sold in a grocery store, if I tell the shop clerk who's shelving the item this is really bad, he doesn't care, he's getting his wages, he goes home at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter to him. So there's a disconnect, I think, which is partly the result of just the scale of civilisation now, how far food travels and?

ELISABETH LOPEZ
Yes, the global supply chains are incredible.

KEN ALBALA
Unbelievable how a tomato grown in Mexico makes it way to Canada is just a long bizarre story that really cuts out the producer. The producer makes a couple of cents per truckload and the middle men, the brokers, the people who - the stock people, everyone gets a cut. So by the end if you're paying $0.30 for a tomato, the grower got $0.01 and everyone else in the middle got all the rest. That's sad. I think there are definitely philosophical and ethical and aesthetic reasons for buying your produce and meat fresh and local, but having said that there's also economies of scale and sometimes it makes sense to have everything processed in one facility, it's safer that way. And sometimes it does actually cost more - I've read an article, and I'm not sure I believe all this - but it said that it costs more to grow a lamb in England and sell it there than it does to grow it in New Zealand and ship it all the way. Cost meaning what? Ultimate price or are you taking into account the pollution and the gas spent and the middle men, all that stuff, I think, complicates the issue to a greater degree than this article made out. But sometimes it does make sense,
sometimes bigger is more affordable.
The ultimate question is do we sacrifice much of what we think is good about food to make it cheap? In the US cheap trumps everything. We need to have vast quantities of food, we want it as cheap as possible and subsidy's just one side of that. We take tax money, put it into the subsidies, pay the farmer, then take the tax money to give to the people who are on food stamp programs to buy those products. So it's a self-supporting system that I think if you were just to say okay, we're not supporting corn anymore, you'd lose a lot of votes obviously because the corn lobby in the centre of the country really wants people to buy corn. You could suddenly then grow tomatoes in the middle of the country and you could grow lettuce and yes, you'd have to go seasonal, you could not get them year round, but ultimately do you want to buy an out of season tomato that tastes like nothing and spend a lot of money for it and say I'm eating healthy, I'm having a salad, because there's a fresh tomato in here, when ultimately it's awful. It's no wonder kids don't like their vegetables, they're often really pretty bad.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
You were mentioning ethics before and there was a really interesting controversy in late 2013, when a journalist for the Guardian wrote about quinoa, which is the darling of people who want to eat wholefoods at the moment, saying that because of the success of quinoa, the local Peruvians and Bolivians who are quite impoverished had been priced out of the very foodstuff they were producing and there was this controversy that I think was never ultimately resolved, because there's a lot of information missing about what's actually happening in these communities. But it just seemed to uncover the complexity and okay, if I gravitate towards authentic food out of a desire to be ethical about my food consumption, it gets really complicated.

KEN ALBALA
It does and I think that ultimately most people don't think very hard about where the food comes from and there's a disjunct honestly between the cooking and gastronomic side of it and the farming, is that most people just don't really care much about where it comes from. They think eating quinoa has got to be ethical because it's this high protein, vegetarian, it's got a really neat history to it connected with the ancient Inca. It was basically one of the things that supported their civilisation. So was potatoes, but those aren't so hot, but the quinoa is marketed as health food and obviously when there's an enormous demand, big companies got involved and it meant that they ended up either buying up the whole yield for that whole year from the local communities, which meant I think that they can't even afford it themselves now, they ended up eating other things. Then it starts out as being a really cheap grain, when it makes it to the supermarkets in the west it's really very expensive. It would never be a staple in the west, just because of the cost.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
I suppose we've seen that with other foods in the past; oysters used to be a very common working class delicacy in London and lobster in some places in the US was just considered a rat and now?
KEN ALBALA
Yes, well food not only follows fashions, but I think that it's a matter of supply and demand. There are things in the past that people loved and demanded and the price was high and it just switched. Let me give you an interesting example. There are cuts of meat that were once considered really lowly and not very interesting and tough and you could buy them very cheap. What in the United States we call skirt steak, it's basically the diaphragm of the animal and it was always one of the cheapest meats you could find. It was used mostly in fajitas, to make Mexican food, grilled and then sliced up. The last time I bought it, god, it was - well in the US beef is very cheap but this was like $12, $13 a pound, which compared to ground beef is $2 or $3. So it suddenly for whatever reason became very popular and suddenly the demand went up and now it's been revived, suddenly people have discovered it again. I'm hoping it's going to happen with organ meats, because if I think of all the kinds of flesh that go through a definite denigration because of association with poor people, organ meats are one of those things that I think it's gotten revived in gastronomic circles but it hasn't really hit the major populous yet. You don't see anyone cooking kidneys, in the US at least. I hope they will again.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
This is Up Close, I'm Elisabeth Lopez. Our guest today is professor of history, Ken Albala, and we're talking about food, how it's marketed and the quest for authenticity. Ken, I've come across a CEO of a food company saying, really food marketers need to start getting away from marketing their foodstuffs based on what they don't have, what preservatives or colorants they don't have, and really start romancing the ingredients. What does a quote like that make you think?

KEN ALBALA
Well I think they already are really romancing the ingredients to such an extent that people are misled all the time. I agree with the marketer though that telling everyone what something doesn't have is a terrible way to sell food, because now every product regardless of what it is will say gluten free on it, because people buy an apple and they think this has gluten in it. So gluten free is suddenly - the industry follows the latest nutritional studies, so if something comes out that is bad for you or good for you, they'll throw it on the label and there's very little legal control about what can be or can't be on a label. So if someone says good for lowering cholesterol, suddenly oh, so it's good for lowering cholesterol, they'll put it on the label and smack it there. I think that's a negative - it's trying to get people to buy things by scaring them ultimately.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
I think there are other reasons to buy red wine other than the number of antioxidants it has.

KEN ALBALA
That's right and who does the research on the antioxidants? In this case it was Mondavi in California, the people who make the wine. So you have to take all of that
with a grain of salt and I think consumers don't know who did the research, or they
don't know if the findings were conclusive or what happened. It's just literally one
paper will come out saying X and then all of a sudden you see it all over the labels
and people start to buy it. So I think my take on all of this, authenticity and on truth in
labelling, is that you should just really have an independent government agency that
is not politically driven, that can say this is what's in this product, period, we're not
trying to mislead you or scare you or anything. Tell us how many calories it is, give
us a reasonable serving size, I don't care how much sodium or potassium or niacin
or things are in there. The daily minimum requirements for food, daily allowances is
what they used to call them in the US, are almost meaningless because no one
really knows how much potassium should I get in a day and should I eat six of these
or one. It's ridiculous. I think it's too much information in one respect and we should
not be allowed to use certain words that just don't mean anything; natural means
nothing. Everything in the world comes from nature, doesn't it? I think some fair
labelling would make sense and even avoiding health claims. I think that those have
to be really just taken off. To say that this is heart healthy or this is - I can understand
maybe information for diabetics or people who have allergies and that sort of thing,
yes, put that on there. But I think the front of a package should just tell you this is
what this is, here's what's in it and ultimately, I think, for consumers also the closer
you can get to a raw ingredient the better you are, because then you know it's
actually food. Now, you don't know what pesticides have been sprayed or what
insecticide or anything like that, but I think you're always better off eating the food
itself rather than something that's processed.

Let me give you an example, in the supermarkets in the US now they've come out
with a little plastic package with apples that are cut up inside. I assume they have to
spray some kind of thing on it to make sure that they don't go brown and they give
these to little kids. I was thinking when did children forget how to use their teeth?
Apples already come in a really nice package that keeps them pretty self-contained
and if you wash it before you put it in your bag, I guess, why can't a kid use his teeth
for apples? Well they decided it's more fun because kids like fun food, so if we make
it in little shapes then they'll eat it more often. I was like I just don't believe that. I
think what they've done is they've convinced mothers and fathers who buy food that
their children are going to eat their apples if they buy this one and of course it costs
three times more to package and spray the crap on it than it does just to give them
an apple. I have a deep mistrust of industry and their intentions.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
Ken, tell us about the origins of the slow food movement and how intricately,
intricately involved McDonald's is with this movement.

KEN ALBALA
Well the funny thing about that whole story is that when this was announced, that the
movement was starting - and I don't know if this is a myth or a real story, but it was a
protest against a McDonald's being opened at the foot of the Spanish Steps in
Rome, which is this beautiful place and it's obviously very touristic so they knew they
would sell McDonald's there. So I went with students on a trip to Italy and I said let's
make a pilgrimage to that McDonald's, let's just see what the big deal was, why Carlo
Petrini got so upset about this. We had been talking about the roots of the movement are actually in the Communist Party, I don't know whether many people know that, but they're definitely hardline Reds. So we went to visit this McDonald's and the weird thing is (a) it was beautiful, it had marble columns in the front and it had a little gelataria up front, a very Italian thing. It had a standard McDonald's menu once you went into the back, but this was hardly a blot on the Spanish Steps neighbourhood and it was interpreted in a very Italian way, just the seating and the way the service worked.

That's the thing that people assume about McDonald's, is that it's really all cardboard cut-out, the same menu, the same everything everywhere you go. It's not. I went to a McDonald's in Hong Kong just to see what it was like and people told me well, sometimes they will serve a completely Chinese menu along with the other ones and the Chinese people argue about that. They say no, we don't want that, we want American food, because that's what they think it is. So apparently they go back and forth between serving the local community and doing fish burgers for lent in Greece, or I think there's even a McAloo Tikki burger in India that doesn't use beef, it uses lamb instead. So sometimes they make concessions like that and of course in the US they don't use beef tallow to fry their fries anymore, so they taste like aluminum now, they're awful. But what people really want is the generic mass produced American food and whatever you say, the number 2 consumers of McDonald's in the world are the French.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
I think I'll die of shock here. On that note, thanks very much for coming in, Ken.

KEN ALBALA
Thank you for having me.

ELISABETH LOPEZ
You've been listening to Up Close and we've been talking with historian, Professor Ken Albala from the University of the Pacific in California about food marketing and the quest for authenticity. You can find links, a full transcript and more information on this episode at our website at upclose.unimelb.edu.au. Up Close is a production of the University of Melbourne, Australia. This episode was recorded on Thursday 13 March 2014 and our producers were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bemmel, audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer and Up Close is created by Eric van Bemmel and Kelvin Param. I'm Elisabeth Lopez, until next time, goodbye.

VOICEOVER
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