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"Ethnography of New Culinary Elites. Gastronomic Heritage, Gender and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Oaxaca (Southern Mexico)"

This presentation focuses on the rise of new culinary female elites in Oaxaca. The state known for its rich culinary tradition ("the heart of national gastronomy") yet one of the poorest in Mexico, marked by historically determined, deeply rooted social and cultural disparities.

The group under study (chefs, native 'master cooks', owners of cooking schools and restaurants) has emerged as a result of the rapid commodification and privatization of Oaxacan food cultures for the sake of culinary tourism industry. This branch of tourism has grown considerably after Traditional Mexican Cuisine was inscribed on UNESCO Intangible Heritage List in 2010 owing to state-led development strategies promoting cultural and ethnic tourism based on the logics of neoliberal multiculturalism (Kymlicka 2012) as well as numerous private enterprises.

This paper is based on the results of extended multi-sited fieldwork carried out between 2011 and 2017 in central Oaxaca as well as critical reading of secondary sources. I apply the methodological tool of food-related biography to study the role female cooks play in the process of heritagization of local foodways. I am interested in the ways women use their knowledge of food and foodways to enter the elitist and highly masculine space of gastronomy, become successful, achieve prestige and gain momentum for social mobility in a broader context of (inter)national cultural politics of food as heritage. My analysis reveals the mundane workings of gendered heritage-making: negotiations and contestations as well as open conflicts over heritage representations, politics and rights between different groups of new female culinary elites. It also scrutinizes the process of heritagization of foodways as a new space of the (re)production of social, cultural and economic inequalities along gender, class and ethnic lines in contemporary Mexico.