A Fresh Defense: The Cultural Biography of Quality in Puerto Rican Fishing

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Figure 1: *Sierra alazana* (Cero Mackerel)

Figure 2: *Sierra carite* (King Mackerel)

Figure 3: Salmonete
A Fresh Defense: A Cultural Biography of Quality in Puerto Rican Fishing

‘Nos defendemos con pescado fresco.’ (“We defend ourselves with fresh fish.”)

—Puerto Rican fisher

Theorizing Quality: Quality Lives from Quality Products

The inspiration and guiding theme of this article derives from its opening epigraph. When Puerto Rican fishers repeat this expression, they are referring to marshalling a defense against cheaper, lower-quality, imported fish, but here we use it metaphorically in light of developments along Puerto Rico’s coast, in natural resource policy, and in international food marketing that threaten artisanal fishing livelihoods. As artisanal food producers, Puerto Rican fishers are part of a larger producer group that has recently garnered increasing attention of average consumers, popular writers (e.g. Pollan 2006), and academics interested in issues ranging from fair trade initiatives to the fates of peasant farmers and fishers under current political economic regimes (Heller 2007; Moberg 2009). This attention is largely due to the perception that artisanal producers, producing on smaller scales than industrial food producers, are more likely to emphasize quality. Along with producing smaller volumes of food, artisanal producers may be more interested in quality because they are producing for their own consumption and for gifts, sale, and use locally, usually by family and community members, and because they add value to their foods in unique, qualitatively distinct ways, often drawing on local culinary traditions. Focusing on quality, too, artisanal food producers have found a way, potentially, to compete with large food manufacturers.

Artisans usually acquire their knowledge through experience or apprenticeship rather than through formal education, their production systems tied to family, community, and cultural tradition, dependent on unique local natural resources, and seated in local history and reciprocal networks of gift and commodity exchange (Menzies and Butler 2006). As a source of strength in economic competition, artisanal producers attempt to insure the reproduction of their production regimes—and by extension their families and communities—by producing quality products. At the same time, many artisanal producers are petty capitalists, struggling to maintain class positions as small-scale entrepreneurs yet often having to
move between self-employment and wage work to survive and subsidize artisanal production. As such, they may exploit themselves, family members, and others in their production processes, justifying such behavior with moral economic sentiments (discussed further below) and, in the case of artisanal fishing, because their livelihoods face many threats.

Threats to artisanal fishing are found throughout coastal regions worldwide: growing populations, changing land use, shrinking wetlands, marine pollution, diminished access to the water, tourism, gentrification, imports of low-cost seafood, and complex regulations over the catching and marketing of fish and seafood (Author1 1999, 2011; Pollnac, et al. 2009). Similar pressures face other artisanal producers, forcing many into alternative social and economic relationships that expose them to new risks and new opportunities while drawing them away from their natal or preferred production regimes. Faced with these threats to their preferred ways of life—threats, that is, to quality lives—Puerto Rican fishing families attempt to protect natural resources they depend on (Author 3 1990; Author 2 2007), influence seafood distribution networks, and emphasize the importance of high quality products in producing and reproducing high quality lives. Qualitatively, these responses are similar to those of small-scale producers who market quality food and other products around the world, including artisanal fishing peoples yet also farmers, ranchers, and others maintaining livelihoods in vastly different environments (Heath and Meneley 2007; Heller 2007; Paolisso 2007).

Several recent developments attest to growing consumer interest in quality goods produced under artisanal conditions: community-based agriculture and fisheries; the search for locally produced products; branding products with reference to regions, territories, or geographies; the growing artisanal production of meats, wines, dairy products, and other foods; and an expansion of marketing options for small producers (e.g. fair trade initiatives, consignment shops, farmers’ markets) (Heller 2007; Ostrum 2011; Roseberry 1996). In these venues, artisanal production constitutes a critique of industrial production and its tendency to seek out ever more underpaid and less free workers, destroy environments, mistreat animals, genetically modify organisms, engage in unfair trade practices, and dispossess smaller competitors (Heller 2007; Pollan 2006). Industrial agriculture has been heavily criticized for substituting
fuel crops for food crops and, in Mark Moberg’s (2009:8) words, “threatening the sustainability of life on earth” (Manning 2004, 2009; Midgett 2009; Mintz 2009; Thu 2009). Many consumers are willing to pay higher prices for products they perceive to be of higher quality and produced under more humane, environmentally sensitive, or other morally sound methods (Pollan 2006).

Although industrial food producers long considered artisanal producers marginal, growing evidence suggests that they are feeling more threatened by them as they receive more public attention and support. For example, large retail food chains have marshaled labeling campaigns to advertise portions of their merchandise as local, organic, or otherwise environmentally friendly and healthy. Most land grant colleges and many government agencies still have apologists for industry, usually economists or agronomists, who argue that artisanal producers can neither satisfy national or global food demands nor comply with food safety standards (Heller 2007). Finally, certification programs’ production criteria that are costly for smaller producers to implement (e.g. GAP—Good Agricultural Practices; Altria 2011), or that distribute the burdens of compliance unfairly, benefit larger over smaller producers and, under conditions of contract production, allow corporate entities to dictate production practices of direct producers (Benson 2008).

While these efforts have yet to turn the tide against artisanal production, artisanal producers have not escaped criticism regarding the occasionally detrimental consequences of their production practices simply because they produce on a small scale. In addition to the concerns mentioned earlier about product safety (especially with food producers), at times exploitative labor practices, and their capacity to meet consumer demand, scholars have documented artisanal producers engaged in environmentally destructive and socially disruptive practices. These include, for example, degrading natural resources (Alvard 1993; Diamond 1986), marshaling political support to restrict access to common property resources (Acheson 1986; Author3 1990), manipulating market access, and channeling public resources to support private interests (Peréz 2005). Nevertheless, among Puerto Rican fishers and other small-scale, artisanal producers, the evidence for sophisticated knowledge bases that can lead to conservation practices has been voluminous (Author2 2007; Menzies 2001). Similarly, their interest in producing quality
products can stimulate them to object to environmentally damaging processes that can jeopardize the quality of natural resources from which those products come.

Of broader theoretical interest, our interest in product quality derives from the long history of anthropology’s engagement with economic value and, by extension, social scientific critiques of economic science dating to Marx, Mauss, Polanyi, and those most recently focusing on political economy, moral economy, and other alternative economic logics (Author1 2009; Blim 2001; Edelman 2005; Gudeman 2001; Kingsolver 2011). Specifically, we argue that Puerto Rican fishers focus on quality seafood to maintain and reproduce fishing and fishing communities as highly valued, quality livelihoods. We substantiate these claims with a general discussion of fishing and seafood in Puerto Rico and with narrower cultural biographies of two species of fish that Puerto Ricans highly value yet which fail to rise into the official landings data in great numbers, indicating that they withhold many of these species from the market for personal use, including home consumption and gifting.

Adapted from work in Appadurai’s (1986) The Social Life of Things, the cultural biographies we develop involve tracing the social relationships that extend to and from the things of our world, whether those things are commodities, gifts, inalienable properties, livelihoods, or other objects. Cultural biographies are deliberately anthropocentric, focusing on human interaction with the object, including, in the case of fish, human interaction with marine habitats, with the fish as a biological organism, as a species targeted and processed by fishers, as a commodity, as a food, as a gift, and so forth. This breadth enables us to consider social relations involved in production, exchange, and consumption. Cultural biographies are also principally qualitative in nature rather than heavily dependent on quantitative modeling or data sets, such as landings data, that can be of questionable quality, and they tend to be based in local areas yet can draw on more regional and international information sources to flesh them out.

Just as The Social Life of Things examined “regimes of value” (Appadurai 1986:15), our purpose in linking social relationships to seafood in general and specifically to two species of fish is to disentangle how production, exchange, and consumption of seafood in Puerto Rico create and add value to not only marine resources but also fishing livelihoods and the overall quality of life of coastal communities. Our
analysis critiques recent work that emphasizes the creation of value primarily in exchange relations or distribution networks, including kula ring type exchanges of deeply symbolic significance (Graeber 2001; Munn 1986; Appadurai 1986) by locating value-creating and value-adding processes within livelihoods that engage production, exchange, and consumption. Although Appadurai and his colleagues, along with Graeber and Munn, recognize the potential for production spheres to generate value, Appadurai’s focus on commodities and Graeber’s and Munn’s on exchange relations privileges theoretical interest in exchange over either production or consumption, in line with conventional economic science. Munn’s (1986:11-12) assertion that value derives from extending one’s “spacetime” beyond the self, for example, not only explicitly places the creation or transformation of value in an exchange context, but contrasts exchange with consumption in a way that further champions exchange relative to consumption: “I argue that certain broad types of Gawan act are fundamental symbolic operators of positive value transformation and its negation. As my use of the example of Gawan overseas food hospitality may perhaps suggest, these consist respectively of the separation of food from the self (the transmission of food to others to consume) and its negative polarity, the incorporation of food in consumption.”

In one of the most comprehensive anthropological treatments of value, David Graeber (2001), drawing on Munn, repeatedly subordinates production to exchange as a source of value. In a telling passage about the use of food among the Baining, for example, he initially discusses the importance of production—or, more accurately, work—as an act that not only separates humans from animals but, through gardening and feeding children, transforms infants into “fully formed social beings, humans whose humanity, in turn, is defined largely as a capacity for productive action” (2001:70). Yet he follows these observations with what he argues is the true source of value—exchange, or giving—by saying, “So even here, there is a sort of minimal hierarchy of spheres. Producing food is not simply a value in itself. The most prestigious act in Baining society is giving food, or other consumables” (2001:70, emphasis in original).

Finally, by examining links between quality food and quality livelihoods, we draw on recent work in anthropology and beyond that criticizes economic science for its overemphasis on indicators of
material conditions of existence in estimations of well-being, including Blim’s (2001) recent work and
work on moral economy, in particular E.P. Thompson’s (1971:81) observation that poor quality bread
produced poor quality work: “There is a suggestion that labourers accustomed to wheaten bread actually
could not work—suffered from weakness, indigestion, or nausea—if forced to change to rougher
mixtures.” Linking the quality of food to the quality of work within a focus on the marketing of bread,
Thompson created the basis for a strong theoretical connection between consumption, exchange, and
production in their joint creation of value.

In their understanding of the proper role of producers and merchants and the proper functioning
of markets and the provision of proper food, the eighteenth century working poor developed moral
economic sentiments that we encounter again and again in our ethnographic fieldwork among artisanal
fishers. As the opening epigraph suggests, many small-scale fishers routinely point to the quality of their
fresh, local seafood over fish and shellfish that are produced in remote locations (often with deleterious
environmental practices and under socially unjust labor conditions) and imported from afar (Author1
1999). These sentiments are echoed by people who brand local seafood by region or association with a
fishing community (Andreatta 2010). Whenever producers and their allies in commodities markets take
steps to alter the biographies of commodities, there are political economic consequences, including
evaluating economic fulfillment in ways different from those promulgated by capital, focusing on well-
being, happiness, and similar conditions (Blim 2005; Pollnac, et al. 2009) rather than higher labor
productivity, increased profits, and uneven accumulation.

For Puerto Ricans, defending themselves with the high quality fruits of their labor entails far
more than catching and selling fresh fish. Marshaling an effective defense against what seem like
insurmountable odds—particularly highly organized and heavily capitalized interests representing the
food industry, real estate, and tourism—involves several value-adding strategies that, in the process of
defending fishing families’ livelihoods, redefine coastal and marine environments and reassess the place
of fishing and fishing families in coastal history, communities, and culture.

Villas Pesqueras in Puerto Rico: Methods and Background
This work is based on research conducted from 2003 to 2006 on Puerto Rico’s fisheries, research that grew out of several previous studies that the authors have conducted separately and together dating back to the 1980s (Author 3 1990; Author 1 and Author 3 2002; Author 1, Author 3, and Author 2 2007; Author 3 and Author 2 2009; Author 2 2006). Throughout this work, similar themes regarding the value of local coastal resources emerged again and again in our conversations with fishers and other coastal dwellers over several field projects spanning more than two decades and multiple sites, indicating their lasting importance for Puerto Rican fisheries. Most recently, we visited every active Villa Pesquera (fishing association) in Puerto Rico (n=86), interviewing fishermen at each site, taking transect walks (or walks through significant fishing sites with fishers), conducting focus groups and follow-up interviews, witnessing important fishing events (e.g. patron saint ceremonies), ground-proofing census data collected by the state, and so forth (Author 1, Author 3, and Author 2 2007).

This work revealed the internal heterogeneity of Puerto Rico’s fishing populations, ranging from fairly well-capitalized fishermen of the west coast to the smaller, part-time fishers of the north coast and those more engaged with the tourist economy of the east and south. In general, most Puerto Rican fishers fish from small (<25 feet), motor-powered vessels for a variety of species that inhabit coral reefs, near-shore shelf, and deep-water or open-ocean environments. Although there is a good deal of variation related to local social dynamics and individual variation in attitudes towards cooperation and independence, by and large those fishers that the state considers bona fide commercial fishers tend to belong to Villas Pesqueras, where they have lockers for their gear, seafood markets, slip space, piers, and other fishing infrastructure.

Like other small-scale fishers and resource users operating within intermediate, modernized economies, Puerto Rican fishers often engage in multiple livelihoods, occupying intermediate/ambiguous positions between a traditional subsistence depending on local ecosystems and a “modern,” proletarian subsistence, engaged with larger labor markets (Author 1 and Author 3 2002). Fishing in Puerto Rico forms part of a lasting (300 + years) coastal economic tradition that combines fishing and reliance on coastal resources with other activities such as odd-jobs and work in the formal economy (both in Puerto

Author 2 (2006), for example, found that in southeastern Puerto Rico, many fishers who are widely recognized by their peers as “experts” or “highly successful” fishers have been career part-time fishers. Author 2 (2006; 130) also found that while fishers are very much working class Puerto Ricans, for the most part they enjoy a relatively prosperous material standard of living (average 9.9 (1.33 St.Dev.) in a 13-item material standard of living scale), the resilience of which is partly buttressed by engagement with fishing and coastal resources. The average fishing household in Southeastern Puerto Rico in 2004 had running water, electricity, a washing machine, a color television, refrigerator, at least one automobile, a stove range, a microwave oven, a music system, ceiling fans, and an electric water heater. Furthermore, most (76%) owned their own homes. Thus, fishing is not a desperate, “poverty” occupation but an integral part Puerto Rican fishers’ livelihood strategy which positions them in an economic position that is intermediate between those characteristic of fishermen in “Western” (Europe and North America) and those in “non-Western” contexts. Fishers also have high symbolic capital, which they deploy selectively in political conflicts with competitors for coastal access and which also entices local elected politicians to recruit and sometimes exploit them in political campaigns (Author1 and Author3 2002). In summary, like fishers elsewhere (Pollnac et al. 2009), they enjoy high quality livelihoods. Below, we discuss quality in relation to two important fish in Puerto Rico, developing cultural biographies of both species within a more general history of seafood consumption in Puerto Rico.

Local and Imported Seafood in Puerto Rico

Ironically, local seafood consumption in Puerto Rico evolved from a complex history in which imported seafood played a critical role, existing alongside the casual seasonal and commercial exploitation of local marine resources. From early Spanish colonization, Puerto Rico depended on imported fish, mostly salted codfish, sardines, and mackerel in brine, from Spain, while satisfying local needs with fresh fish caught in seines, fishweirs and traps, and the hunting of manatees and sea turtles (Author 3 1985). Fishweirs, located in the estuaries, were the main source of fresh fish, although a handful of “professional” fishers plied the nearby waters, dodging English and Dutch pirates and
privateers. Despite relatively abundant marine resources, the interest of the Spanish settlers in other highly profitable productive activities, such as mining and sugar cane cultivation, and the colonial government’s overzealous control of the local waters, did not encourage fishing as an important economic activity. The rich biodiversity of the coral reefs and sea grass beds offered a mosaic of colors and species of fish, gastropods and mollusks, but in small populations, restricting the exploitation of most species except sea turtles, which were targeted until the mid 1970’s.

Meanwhile, massive amounts of imported salted fish such as cod, haddock, and herring sustained Puerto Rican slaves, peasants, and rural workers. Throughout the nineteenth century, Puerto Rico opened its market to New England groundfish, with the United States becoming a key supplier of cod and other fishes. The colony also expanded its market to import various commodities, including saltfish, from the British, who landed the fish mostly from Newfoundland; Newfoundland also provided cod to Spain throughout the 19th century. As the Spanish were obsessed with the consumption of cod, in a myriad of gastronomic forms, Puerto Rico inherited that taste and dependence.

In the first four decades of the 20th century, with the economy dominated by the U.S. based sugar corporations who operated the large mechanized central mills, salted cod remained the main source of protein for the labor force, and Puerto Rico became, arguably, the main Caribbean and Latin American client of the Newfoundland fish merchants and their powerful fisheries marketing institutions. Salted fish was shipped to Puerto Rico and distributed by Spanish owned firms of importers, who controlled the local market and pricing, until the U.S. and local government moved aggressively to set prices and buy the fish at preferential prices, to provide the labor force with a relatively cheap source of food, and to help the sugar corporations defray the potential cost of maintaining the labor force. The amount of imported fish (a lean and dried mass of meat) was staggering, and surpassed the local production of fresh fish, weighted with heads, entrails and a large content of water. In 1932, Puerto Rico fishers landed 3.5 million pounds of fish (roughly, the same amount of fish caught today), while importing 32 million pounds of salted fish from Newfoundland (Author1, Author3, and Author2 2007).
During the first half of the 20th century, the local and U.S. governments worked hard—especially during World War II—to maintain a constant flow of cod from Newfoundland, at prices affordable to the agricultural workers, undercutting the market for local fish. During a moment of scarcity of that key staple, the Puerto Rican state outfitted a fleet to fish for cod off the Newfoundland coast (Pérez 2005:58). That effort failed, and Puerto Ricans continued satisfying their dependence from Newfoundland until the 1960’s, when frozen seafood from U.S., Asian, and Latin American markets began to replace codfish.2 Presently, we estimate that imported fish amounts to nearly 70 to 75 percent of the fish consumed in Puerto Rico. It has been against this background that local, fresh fish has emerged as a defense.

The Cultural Biography of Yabucoa Sierra

Yabucoa is a municipality on Puerto Rico’s southeastern coast whose fishing community occupies a small Villa Pesquera called La Puntita—the Little Point. It is neither the most nor least productive of Villas Pesqueras in Puerto Rico, ranking twenty-fifth in landings out of forty-one coastal municipalities and nineteenth in dependence on fishing out of sixty-one Villas Pesqueras ranked in recent research (Author1, Author3, and Author2 2007). Although La Puntita fishers describe sierra as their “most important fish,” landings data from the Villa contradict this.

Sierra is a highly prized and versatile fish in Puerto Rico, as likely to be served from a small roadside stand beside a factory as in a restaurant with cloth napkins and fine china overlooking the Caribbean Sea. The common name sierra is used in Puerto Rico for two different species: alazana (Scomberomorus regalis or Cero mackerel) and carite or veritable (King mackerel, Scomberomorus cavalla). Cero mackerel (Figure 1) is smaller than king mackerel (Figure 2) but larger than Spanish mackerel (S. maculates), reaching between eighty millimeters and a meter in length compared to the king’s 1.5 meters. Both are pelagic species, roaming individually or in small groups from the North Atlantic to the Caribbean, South America, and the Gulf of Mexico in their annual migrations. This range makes them vulnerable to capture in several nations’ waters, and hence they are sold in Puerto Rico as imported seafood and as local fish.
During an impromptu focus group at La Puntita, the local fishers agreed, without hesitation, that sierra was the fish most important to them, yet state data list white grunt and snapper as their most frequently landed species. This contradiction derives from the fact that local highly prized fish are often consumed at home, sold or given away locally, and hence are not recorded in official landings data. Although sierra is not the most abundant fish in the local landings (S. cavalla 2.9% and S. regalis 1.5%), it is an iconic species along the entire coast. Many fishers target sierra, mostly in the north and east coast, where close to two-thirds of fishers target sierra, compared to around a third in the south and 16 percent in the west (Matos Caraballo et al 2007). While few fish in Puerto Rico are used to identify a specific place, such as pargos (snappers) in La Parguera, sierra refers to a large fishing bank off the west coast, also indicating the month when the fish becomes abundant: Abril la Sierra (“[in] April, the mackerel”).

Fishers at La Puntita complained that imported sierra can sell for as low as 79¢ per pound in the large supermarket chains. To cover their costs, they need to sell it for $2.00 per pound. They are, of course, selling a fresher, quality product, and one that they can add value to by serving it in a small, open, seaside restaurant on the Villa grounds. By adding value to sierra in this way, La Puntita fishers join fishing families across Puerto Rico involved in the coastal tourist trade, a move driven by both moral economic and political economic motives, encouraging tourists to visit their fishing association, experience the association’s importance to coastal ambiance, and spend money on their catch. At the same time, encouraging coastal tourism may result in increased coastal development and the resort construction and gentrification that often undermine commercial fishing livelihoods. Yet all along Puerto Rico’s coast, Villas Pesqueras have experimented with coastal tourism, if not through sales of cooked seafood then by providing services and space for recreational boating and fishing, offering tourists boat rides, and selling fresh and frozen seafood.

[Figures 1 & 2 Here]

At La Puntita, the foray into restaurant sales takes place from the heart of a highly politically engaged process: the Villa’s leadership and membership, in conjunction with Villa members from Humacao and other municipalities, have been actively attempting to change the foundation law, la Ley
278, that the Puerto Rican Department of Natural Resources uses to sculpt its fishing regulations. Sierra is part of this process—a fish they consume heavily themselves, along with other freshly caught fish, while they discuss political strategy.

How do we account for the discrepancy between the official, quantitative information on Yabucoa fisheries and the assertion of La Puntita fishers that sierra is their most important fish? The most obvious explanation is that, as with most Puerto Rican fishers, La Puntita fishers move among different fisheries through the course of the year, setting traps for snapper, grouper, and grunts during one time of year and fishing with lines for sierra, *dorado* (mahi), and other species during others. More germane to this discussion, however, is that La Puntita fishers consider sierra their most important species because they judge importance, ultimately, qualitatively: it is a high quality fish and a fish with high qualities—with characteristics that make it superior to many other fish that La Puntita fishers catch. By valuing sierra qualitatively, La Puntita fishers do not discount its monetary value. In fact, its high quality makes its quantitative value all the more important: its quantitative value, in other words, is one of its finer qualities. We perceived this especially poignantly one day when we visited La Puntita to discuss the problems they were having in the fishery.

We arrived in the early afternoon, on a fine late June day with a gentle breeze cooling the open-air restaurant. Three long picnic tables stretched out beside the small kitchen under a thin metal roof. Several middle-aged fishers and a teenager sharing a plate of sierra and white grunt asked us to join them, passing us the sweet fried fish. The communal spirit of this initial impression was typical of the entire day, with many fishers coming and going, buying drinks, sharing ideas, and sharing more plates of fish and fish pastries.

This wasn’t our first visit to La Puntita. During the first, the previous week, when Author 1 stopped by to say that we were studying Puerto Rico’s fisheries for NOAA, the Villa president said, “We’ve been waiting for you,” and led him to a picnic table on which he slapped down a copy of Las Reglas—the fishing regulations—and a copy of La Ley 278. “This,” he said, pointing to Las Reglas, “we have to change. But first we have to change this,” he added, indicating La Ley.
At the Villa that day were the association’s officers and a few local fishers, but on the second visit, over the course of a few hours, several other fishers from other municipalities joined the La Puntita fishers to participate in the discussion. The most prominent among the visitors was the president of the Villa Palmas del Mar, from Humacao, a slight man with African features and a valuable political ally. He was a diver, however, and as such at odds with the trap fishers of La Puntita, as one of the most widespread beliefs in fishing communities in Puerto Rico is that divers steal from traps. Yet perhaps the occasional trap fishers’ tolerance of a diver in their midst derived from both the president’s insider status as a politically-engaged commercial fisher and the La Puntita fishers viewing themselves more as hook-and-line sierra fishers than as trap fishers. Both explanations invoke the idea of community—the former as a social structure made up of specific individuals linked to a way of life and the latter to community as part of one’s identity: in this case, an identity that derives, in part, from hunting, catching, landing, cleaning, selling, cooking, and eating sierra.

Sierra as a food fish—as a favorite food—is central to Yabucoa’s fishing community, and a sense of community—where ideas of proper or legitimate economic roles develop and are shared, maintained, and enforced—is essential to a moral economy. La Puntita fishers land sierra from 18-foot outboard motor powered vessels, intercepting them east and south of Puerto Rico’s southeastern corner. Landing sierra, La Puntita feed themselves, provide high-quality food fish to the association’s restaurant, and sell the fish to a wide variety of venues—from roadside kiosks and small, open air bars frequented by the working class to mid-range and upscale restaurants. La Puntita’s small restaurant enjoys a scenic view of palm trees and the sea in one direction, yet a view of the fishers’ fishing gear and storage lockers in the other. As such, it symbolizes a class position between the working class kiosks and the fancier restaurants, very much in the same way that sierra itself can pass for a working person’s food or a wealthy person’s gourmet dish.

More importantly, how sierra is typically cooked and served, in a marinade known as escabeche, underscores the fish’s freshness along with its deep cultural meaning and lengthy history in Spanish and Puerto Rican cuisine. Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the escabeche marinating process took an
ironic historical turn that deserves some attention. Escabeche recipes were established, officially, in the Spanish cookbooks by the 16th century. According to Berta Cabanillas de Rodríguez, a historian of Puerto Rican gastronomy, the first cookbook published in Spain in 1525 already had a recipe for escabeche (1973:333). It was then a complex concoction reflecting the fruits of the Mediterranean sea, coast, countryside, and forests, consisting of fish broth, vinegar, almonds, hazelnuts, pine nuts, saffron, raisins, parsley, bread crumbs, and cinnamon. The last ingredient showed, perhaps, an acquired taste for exotic species, which helped to make escabeche a special fare among the aristocracy. Shortly after its 16th century appearance, however, it started appearing in the bowls of common folk, containing olive oil, water, vinegar, lime, and laurel leaves. In the 18th century escabeche became a method of pickling fish to preserve it during the long, difficult trip from coastal Spain inland. The method became so effective and popular for preserving and adding flavor (and value) to fish that it fostered a specialized craftsman: el escabechero or the pickler. Fish traders from the northern coast of Spain started to use escabeche on an “industrial” or large scale, using a procedure similar to the one used in households (Cubillo de la Puente 1998:139). Based on its ubiquity in Spanish cookbooks, escabeche, one of the most effective ways to preserve fish, was also one of the most popular flavoring methods in Spanish households.

In Puerto Rico, escabeche is quite popular (especially during Lent), as it combines a traditional way of cooking and eating fish (pan-fried) accompanied with the escabeche marinade, which also contains onions and garlic. It is common to see escabeche in food stands along the coast that do not use much refrigeration, as the pickling preserves the fish for a few days. However, the preferred way to use escabeche is to fry the fresh fish, cover it with the marinade, and eat it few hours afterward or the next day. All the classic Puerto Rican cookbooks include a recipe for escabeche (not distant from the steps taken by the Galician or Basque escabecheros), indicating that the best fish for this fare is sierra (Aboy Valldejuli 1980: 230). Thus when the fishers of La Puntita serve sierra they are invoking to a Mediterranean household tradition that competed with industrial fish processing while also serving a cultural gastronomical fare embedded in local tradition.
The importance of sierra to La Puntita and to the many markets that La Puntita fishers supply, according to La Puntita fishers, underlies their logic for supporting a moratorium on importing sierra from April to August, when they land sierra in great numbers. Its importance has also encouraged them to lobby for restrictions on recreational fishers selling sierra to pay for trip expenses. Given sierra’s importance, it is not surprising that the fishers also object to seasonal closures for the species and to additional licenses to land sierra legally. Sierra’s disposition, thus, has been politicized, occupying a central role in La Puntita fishers’ political activism and critique of current fishing regulations.

The Cultural Biography of South Coast Salmonete

Several Puerto Rican marine resources enjoy limited circulation due to their status as local delicacies or their importance to family and friendship. Outside Arecibo, for example, on the road to a popular beach, families harvest the seasonally aggregating larvae of the Sirajo Goby (*Sicydium plumieri*) with mosquito nets, mix them with pumpkin, and sell them as tamales (a dish of high cultural importance locally known as *setí*) during a limited time of the year. Historically, prior to regulations restricting the landing of undersized species, fishers gifted these small fish to elderly community members. The value of *salmonete* (spotted goatfish) derives from its role in social relations as well, residing in the species’ local importance as a uniquely delicious food fish and one emblematic of both ecological and cultural contexts.

The spotted goatfish, (*Pseudupeneus maculatus*, Mullidae goatfishes) is a small (maximum size, 30 cm), specialized bottom foraging fish that uses two sensitive barbs located on the sides of its mouth to hunt for benthic crustaceans, mollusks, and polychaetes (Munro 1976;1983; Cervigón et al. 1992). It is distributed throughout the Western tropical Atlantic and the Caribbean and an important food fish for a large part of its range (Froese and Pauly 2011; Cervigón et al. 1992). Salmonete inhabit shallow waters up to depths of 90 meters, especially over sand and rock bottoms, and beds of seagrass in reef areas—bathymetric and ecological characteristics widely represented in the ample, gently-sloping shelf marine ecosystems off Puerto Rico’s south coast, as opposed to the sharp drop-offs and narrow shelf found off the north coast. In our conversations with fishers around Puerto Rico, South, Southwestern, and
Southeastern fishers frequently discussed salmonete as a significant fishery, yet their North Coast counterparts mentioned them infrequently.

**[Figure 3 Here]**

Salmonete accounts for under one percent of officially reported landings in Puerto Rico (NOAA 1998-2003), but fishers in the South Coast say that it is underreported in commercial landings because it is first a food fish and second a commercial species. When salmonete are caught, they are often consumed within the fishers’ household or given to family or friends rather than sold to the public. Because the flesh of this fish species is so prized locally for its flavor and consistency, when these very small, light fish are caught it is better to consume them than sell them by the pound commercially. This is in line with moral economic actors’ critique of market economics for measuring all products equally and, more generally, for quantifying quality. Among Puerto Rican fishers, estimating the worth of salmonete in terms of a price per pound fails to capture the true value of this distinctive fish.

Due to its distinctive food value, a local specialty market has developed for salmonetes along the South Coast where people, mostly those from the coastal region, are familiar with its delicate flavor. Local people will visit *pescaderias* (seafood markets) specifically asking for fresh salmonete, and news of a large catch will spread by word of mouth and cause locals to rush to the fish houses. Fishers all along the south coast have mentioned how they market salmonete, through local networks, catering to this specialty consumer base. In 2004, a fisher in a southern municipality described the culinary value of the spotted goatfish:

“…people around here are crazy about the salmonete. That is because of the natural gravy that comes out of it and mixes so well with rice, do you understand me? My mom would make white rice and would put the fried salmonete right on top of it, and that little fish would ooze a red gravy that looked like *achiote* (*Annato*), a natural gravy, that would mix with the rice. It was delicious! You didn’t need any red beans or anything, no more than just the fish and the rice!” (Author2 2004 interview).

It is not trivial when a Puerto Rican says that something can effectively substitute red beans to go with
rice in a meal! Another south coast fisher said:

“The salmonete, that is one of the best fish for eating! Because its flesh has its own taste, it is very flavorful by itself. The sierra, for example, is a great, delicious, fish, but you have to really marinade and season it, you have to make the escabeche, leave it there to marinade with its bay leaves, onion, black pepper, and the other ingredients, for at least two or three days, and then it is great to eat. The chillo (silk snapper) and sama (Mutton snapper), you have to put Sazón (commercial condiment mix) in it and it’s a beautiful meat. But the salmonete, you just bake it or fry it, and no condiment is really necessary…. You just sit down and enjoy it” (Author2 2004 interview).

When a salmonete is fished along the Southern Coast of Puerto Rico, its cultural biography can take one of two or more paths. It can enter reciprocity networks, its high culinary and local symbolic value serving to express, affirm, or create social ties (Graeber 2001), or it can enter the local specialty sales networks, where its unique, locally-known characteristics assure a small, dedicated consumer base. Entering either of these paths, the value attached to salmonete entangles fishers and the fishing community in social relations of different qualities—both cultural, based on local knowledge of, experience with, and taste of salmonete, but the former involving sustaining ties within the community and the latter involving more fleeting, temporary ties between the community and others in the wider municipality.

As often happens when highly valued things circulate through community networks, these values can build on or play off of one another, leading to commodity histories and objects imbued with cultural value that defy common cultural biographical trajectories. For example, when Author2 mentioned the salmonete in an interview with a seafood cook who grew up and worked for decades in southern Puerto Rico, before emigrating to Connecticut, the elder woman reminisced about how she would buy fresh salmonete as much to give as gifts to friends and family as to enjoy herself. In fact, for her the salmonete, along with jueyes (land crabs), local sierra, and cotorros (parrotfish), formed part of the culturally-valued fish species she liked to buy fresh when she visited Puerto Rico, flash-freeze, and smuggle back to her family and South Coast friends in the United States. A freshly-caught salmonete constitutes a meaningful,
nostalgic gift for a Southern coastal Puerto Rican. In this case, an alternative social life of salmonete emerged from its being bought as a commodity by a non-fishing consumer and transformed into a culturally-significant gift.

An object this distinctive and valuable is rarely politically neutral. As we worked in our concurrent field projects around Puerto Rico (Author1, Author3 and Author2 2007; Author2 2006; Author3 and Author2 2009), we found that fishers all over the coast were gravely concerned about the future of salmonete catches in light of recent regulations regarding increased minimum mesh sizes for the multi-species fish traps commonly used in shelf Puerto Rican waters. Fishers along the South Coast repeatedly and independently reported that increased minimum mesh sizes for fish traps was making it very hard to trap even adult salmonetes, reducing salmonete catches and increasing pressure on other species that school in areas where fishers pursue salmonete.

Fishers argued that the regulated minimum mesh sizes (5.1 centimeters, hexagonal mesh) are too large to catch adult salmonetes, due to this fish’s small size, cylindrical, elongated form with small body-depth compared to size (20-25% of body length; Froese and Pauly 2011), and its uncanny ability to squeeze through tight holes. This ability was supported by independent research on fish trap selectivity in southern Puerto Rico. Rosario and Sadovy (1991) measured the species composition of the catch for fish traps of different mesh sizes. Among their findings was that salmonete catches decreased dramatically for any mesh sizes larger than 1.2 x 1.2 cm (square mesh) or 3.8 cm (hexagonal mesh) and virtually ceased at mesh sizes of 5.1 cm or larger. The sweeping application of mesh size regulations had greatly reduced the fishers’ ability to catch salmonete while increasing pressure on other, larger species, such as the red hind (*Epinephelus guttatus*), caught by traps in spotted goatfish habitats. A fisher summarized the situation like this:

“You know that little fish, the salmonete, right? Well, that fish is small, adult fishes are small. The government has prohibited the use of our regular one-inch mesh sizes for out pots, and for some species, that is good. But not in this case. Why? Because the salmonete escapes on any larger mesh size! Any mesh size larger than an inch! If you use as much as one inch and a half, you stop
catching salmonetes. That little fish is almost like an eel. So, when they forbid us to use one-inch mesh sizes, they, *como quien dice* [local adage meaning saying something without really saying it], forbid us from fishing for salmonete. In the last few years I only see this little fish as bycatch from gillnets, by chance” (Author2 2004 Interview).

Between 2003 and 2008, fishers and coastal residents in other Southern Coast locations also expressed concern about future salmonete availability. Fishers did not want to do away with mesh size rules, recognizing the value of this management strategy for some larger important fishery species. What several of these fishers suggested, based on their ecological knowledge, was that one way to get around this multi-species trap selectivity problem could be to allow fishers to use smaller mesh sizes specifically for salmonete, taking advantage of salmonetes’ seasonal migrations from deep to shallow water, which are well-known by South Coast fishers (Author2 2006). The fishers’ widespread concern for their future ability to catch salmonetes highlights the value of this fish species for local fisheries. It also provides a good example of how small-scale fishers’ local ecological knowledge can aid in contemporary fishery management challenges, engaging the politics of salmonete in a positive way by pointing out how fish trap mesh size regulations affect the composition of the multi-species fishery catch, sometimes with unforeseen and even counterproductive consequences (Mahon and Hunte 2001). At the same time, fishers oppose the blanket application of mesh size regulations across all species captured with traps because it ignores qualitative distinctions among species, assuming that a single regulation, based on a specific measure, will affect all species equally.

Examining the cultural biography of South Coast salmonete, we see another of the multiple ways that Puerto Rican fishers defend themselves with fresh fish. Marshalling their local knowledge of cultural, ecological, and political economic contexts, with valuable, high-quality, and freshly caught fish and shellfish, Puerto Rican fishers strategically connect to larger, island-wide markets (as with sierra during Lent), *and* to the specialty, local markets (as with salmonete) in a way that larger, vertically integrated actors such as supermarkets cannot. At the same time, they use their catch to maintain reciprocity networks, creating and reaffirming social ties and the symbolic value of their livelihoods for
the surrounding communities.

Conclusion: The Cultural Biography of Quality

Puerto Rican fishers’ emphasis on quality seafood produced through quality livelihoods is a manifestation of a growing critique, marshaled by artisanal food producers, of industrial food production and distribution (Heller 2007; Moberg 2009; Midgett 2009). It involves relocating quality in community and in social relations of production and exchange that are qualitatively distinct from, yet influenced by, capitalist political economy. Incapable of fully disengaging themselves from capital and still surviving as fishers, Puerto Rican fishers combine the moral economy of artisanal fishing with the political economy of fishing commercially, selectively promoting or opposing coastal tourism based on benefits or threats to their livelihoods, and enlisting their symbolic capital to organize in opposition of fishing regulations.

In as much as value can be created by forming and sustaining social relationships through gift-giving and exchange (Graeber 2001), sierra and salmoneete become most highly valued during those times of their social lives that they reaffirm community membership and circulate within restricted local and regional spheres. In this process, it becomes easy for Puerto Rican fishers and those who follow their life histories (including anthropologists) to contrast artisanal foods with industrial foods, establishing in consumers’ minds a binary opposition that reflects and resonates with other common dichotomies associated with food: local vs. foreign, organic vs. processed, slow vs. fast, techne vs. technoscientific (Heath and Meneley 2007). Conceptually, it is a short distance from these dichotomies to those that characterize the production regimes and lifestyles that produced the foods in question, contrasting moral economy with political economy and perhaps even community with capital. Such contrasts have as deep a history as contrasts between nature and culture, rural and urban, and traditional and modern, based on empirical work, entomology, and philosophy (Williams 1976; Heller 2007).

While it is seductive to use such dichotomies as analytical tools, it is a mistake to exaggerate typology to the point of losing sight of process and forgetting that both production regimes and their products live active social lives within reach of analysis and interpretation through methods like cultural biography. For at the same time artisanal food producers may utilize these dichotomies to distinguish
their foods, industrial food producers can draw on dichotomies of their own design, notably between safe and unsafe foods, reducing food quality to a set of established, quantifiable variables such as numbers of water spigots at production sites. Such processes enable powerful producers to depoliticize social processes that disenfranchise smaller producers and, to use Heller’s words (2007:605), “normalize their increasingly marginal status.”

Equally unfortunate is to privilege exchange over production and consumption as the primary source of value. *Fish* like sierra and salmonete—or, more accurately, the controversies and knowledge bases surrounding their capture—congeal fishing communities into functioning units, highlighting production’s role in creating value from marine resources. Yet *foods* like sierra and salmonete draw fishing communities into larger social networks and broader cultural historical contexts, including those of fellow Puerto Ricans and those of tourists, highlighting exchange and consumption in adding value to marine resources. By defending themselves with fresh fish, adding value to seafood by serving it in the truly authentic fishing environments of Villas Pesqueras, Puerto Rican fishing communities may be courting the very processes of coastal gentrification that are undermining and displacing the quality working lives and livelihoods that Puerto Rican fishers hope to maintain.

Yet when Puerto Rican fishers claim to be defending themselves with fresh fish, they are making a modest assertion that is part of a much grander and comprehensive project (Blim 2005). They are redefining political economic processes in moral economic terms and thereby situating moral economic and political economic behaviors and perspectives within an artisanal fishing livelihood. They are making an argument that certainly must resonate with humanistic social scientists as much as with small producers around the world: that quality is more important than quantity when we are talking about life.
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