

## Cooking and Commensality Along the *Bering Food Bridge* Alimentation et commensalité le long du « pont culinaire de Béring »

### Приготовление и употребление еды вдоль «Берингова пищевого моста»

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Tchoukotka : Comprendre le passé, les pratiques contemporaines et  
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Résumé de l'article

Dans les décennies qui ont suivi le « Vol de l'amitié » Nome-Provideniya de 1988 qui a marqué le début d'un « dégel » dans la politique de la guerre froide entre les États-Unis et l'URSS, la région du détroit de Béring a été le lieu d'échanges continus entre les communautés autochtones de Tchoukotka et d'Alaska. Allant de réunions de famille relativement petites à des événements multicommunautaires régionaux, ces rassemblements transcontinentaux ont facilité le partage bilatéral de connaissances, de langues et de formes de culture expressive autochtones, le tout reflété dans les idées et les pratiques actuelles entourant la nourriture. Envisageant le « Bering Food Bridge » (ou « pont culinaire de Béring ») à la fois comme une métaphore et un modèle d'exploration de la culture et de la cuisine, cet article combine approche anthropologique et approche artistique et offre l'occasion d'une excursion ethnographique au sein des habitudes alimentaires contemporaines des communautés yupik, inupiaq et tchouktches de la région du détroit de Béring.

# Cooking and Commensality Along the *Bering Food Bridge*

Sveta Yamin-Pasternak<sup>i</sup> and Igor Pasternak<sup>ii</sup>

## ABSTRACT

In the decades following the 1988 Nome-Provideniya Friendship Flight that marked the beginning of a “thaw” in US-USSR Cold War politics, the Bering Strait region has been the site of continuous exchanges between the Indigenous communities of Chukotka and Alaska. Ranging from relatively small family reunions to regional multi-community events, these bilateral transcontinental gatherings have facilitated the sharing of Indigenous knowledge, languages, and expressive culture—all reflected in present-day ideas and practices surrounding food. Envisioning the *Bering Food Bridge* as both a metaphor and a model for exploring culture and cuisine, this article employs a synergistic framework of anthropological and artistic research to offer an ethnographic excursion into the contemporary foodways in the Yupik, Inupiaq, and Chukchi communities in the region of the Bering Strait.

## KEYWORDS

Arctic, Bering Strait, foodways, aesthetics, Yupiget, Inupiat, Chukchi

## RÉSUMÉ

Alimentation et commensalité le long du « pont culinaire de Béring »

Dans les décennies qui ont suivi le « Vol de l'amitié » Nome-Provideniya de 1988 qui a marqué le début d'un « dégel » dans la politique de la guerre froide entre les États-Unis et l'URSS, la région du détroit de Béring a été le lieu d'échanges continus entre les communautés autochtones de Tchoukotka et d'Alaska. Allant de réunions de famille relativement petites à des événements multicommunautaires régionaux, ces rassemblements transcontinentaux ont facilité le partage bilatéral de connaissances, de langues et de formes de culture expressive autochtones, le tout reflété dans les idées et les pratiques actuelles entourant la nourriture. Envisageant le « Bering Food Bridge » (ou « pont culinaire de Béring ») à la fois comme une métaphore et un modèle d'exploration de la culture et de la cuisine, cet article combine approche anthropologique et approche artistique et offre l'occasion d'une excursion ethnographique au sein des habitudes alimentaires contemporaines des communautés yupik, inupiaq et tchouktches de la région du détroit de Béring.

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## MOTS-CLÉS

Arctique, Détroit de Béring, modes alimentaires, esthétique, Yupiget, Inupiat, Tchoutkches

## АННОТАЦИЯ

### Приготовление и употребление еды вдоль “Берингова пищевого моста”

Света Ямин-Пастернак, Игорь Пастернак

На протяжении десятилетий, после дружественного рейса Ном-Провидения в 1988 году, ознаменовавшего начало «оттепели» в политике США и СССР времен Холодной войны, район Берингова пролива был местом постоянных обменов между коренными общинами Чукотки и Аляски. Эти двусторонние трансконтинентальные встречи, начиная от относительно небольших семейных воссоединений и заканчивая региональными многопрофильными мероприятиями, способствовали обмену знаний, языков и самобытной культуры коренных народов региона. Все это также отражено в современных идеях и практиках, связанных с традиционной пищей. Рассматривая «Берингов пищевой мост» как метафору и модель для изучения культуры и кухни, данная статья использует синергетическую основу антропологических и эстетических исследований, совершая этнографический экскурс в современную кулинарию среди эскимосов-юпик, инупиаков и чукчей в регионе Берингова пролива.

## КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

Арктика, Берингов пролив, еда, эстетика, эскимосы-юпик, инупиаты, чукчи

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They kept cutting and cutting, and we ate *man'tak* [Yupik for whale skin with adjacent layer of blubber] and *man'una* (crunchy, cartilage-like layer of walrus adjacent to the skin), and fermented flipper, and seal and whale meat, and then [the host], all so serious, says:

— And how about some monkey meat, you all want to eat some of that? And I say:

— I did not know you eat that; everything else you have been eating is just like our food.

To be honest, I did not even know what to think... And then what does he bring out? Bananas! [Laughter]. (Excerpt from a life story shared in Sireniki, Chukotka, 2009)

I once had a full house when they came from across, and so many of them stayed with me. I made them our typical birthday dinner feast: walrus flipper, baby walrus, baked and boiled fish (many kinds), baked halibut, reindeer fat with cloudberry and seal oil, roasted reindeer, boiled reindeer, cake, Jell-O, turkey, ham, chopped [tundra] greens with Crisco and oil, bread, potato salad, and American salad with lettuce and

tomato. I had it all on the floor, the whole spread, and I think they weren't used to eating this way. (Excerpt from a life story shared in Savoonga, Alaska, 2016)

With the snippets above and more to come in this article, we invite the reader to contemplate a few connections in the realm of foodways in the region of the Bering Strait. We speak of Bering Strait foodways (culturally shared ideas and practices surrounding food) as being those of the Indigenous Yupiget, Inupiat, and Chukchi (*Yupiget* is the plural form of Yupik; *Siberian Yupik* is another designation people use; Inupiat is the plural form of Inupiaq; Chukchi is typically used as a singular and plural form; and in some cases, *Lyg"oravetl'an* is used as a self-designation). Like the Bering Land Bridge, the revered geological ancestor of today's geographical region of the Bering Strait (e.g., O'Neill 2005), the *Bering food bridge* is not a linear construction. A composite of geographies, histories, and cultures, the *Bering food bridge* has also been a conceptual viaduct for the principal fields of our professional practice: those of cultural anthropology and visual art. We outline the specifics of our collaborative framework in the later sections.

## Mapping the *Bering Food Bridge*

Of the present-day municipalities mentioned in this article (Fig. 1), the St. Lawrence Island villages of Gambell and Savoonga—on the Alaskan/US side of the Bering Strait—are home to the Yupiget, as are the villages of Sireniki and Novoe Chaplino, which are located in Chukotka, Russia. Sireniki and Novoe Chaplino are regarded historically as Yupik villages, though today they are also home to a number of Chukchi families. Shishmaref and Inalik are among the thirty-four Inupiaq communities in Alaska (*Inalik* and *Little Diomedé*—the latter is the name of the island on which the village of Inalik sits—are often used interchangeably). Enmelen and Lorino are Chukchi villages; Chukchi are the numeric majority among the Indigenous peoples of Chukotka. For a Chukchi resident of these and other Chukotkan villages, it is common to speak of their cultural self-designation by specifying whether they are a *coastal* or *maritime* Chukchi or a *tundra* or *reindeer* Chukchi; these have to do with how the person regards their heritage way of life, independent of whether or to what extent they are directly involved in the hunting of marine mammals or herding reindeer. As regional hubs, Provideniya and Lavrentiya (Chukotka) and Nome (Alaska) have larger mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations than do the other communities mentioned here.



**Figure 1.** Map showing the Bering Strait communities mentioned in this article. Image created by Igor Pasternak, 2021, with public domain files released for free and unrestricted use worldwide through Wikimedia Commons, the free media repository.

With intricately nuanced cross-cultural encounters at different points in the history of the aforementioned places, today’s sociogeographic portrait of the Bering Strait region is a product of the long-connected Yupik, Inupiaq, and Chukchi societies intersecting with the policies and colonial legacies of their enveloping states. Pertinent to the topic of foodways are government-initiated relocations of Indigenous villages) and the forced settling of nomadic people (hence the presence of several generations of Chukchi identifying as *tundra Chukchi* or *reindeer Chukchi* in coastal villages; state-mandated secondary education, facilitated in great part through full-time residential schools; and various new organizations and enterprises which, along with novel forms of employment and production, created new contexts for socializing and sharing—or hiding food (see Yamin-Pasternak et al. 2014). For much of the second half of the 20th century, the Cold War politics in the region interrupted exchanges that were part of the long-existing cross-continental ties captured in the oral traditions, local knowledge, and

ethnohistorical and archaeological records. The 1988 Nome-Provideniya Friendship Flight marked the beginning of a post-Cold War warming of US-USSR relations. It was followed by somewhat of a renaissance period in trans-Beringian travel, which in the next decades made it possible for many bilateral visits to take place between communities on the US and Soviet/Russian sides.

Of the three Indigenous societies whose culinary knowledge we engage, the Yupiget is currently the only one with a large community representation on both the Chukotkan and Alaskan sides of the Bering Strait. That said, the recent exchanges, as well as longer histories of social, economic, and kin ties formed through marriage and extended family networks, also include the Inupiat and Chukchi. Extensive documentation that speaks to the distinct aspects of the social organization, spirituality, and other socio-cultural dimensions of each of the Bering Strait Indigenous societies is found in the regional literature and oral traditions (Bemuth 2019; Bogoras 1904-09; Burch 2013[1971]; Kerttula 2000; Krupnik and Chlenov 2013; Krupnik and Vakhtin 1997; Nelson 1983 [1899]; Ray 1975; Schweitzer and Golovko 1997, 1995; Yamin-Pasternak 2007a). Each of the region's Indigenous languages is also distinct (though Yupik and Inupiaq languages both belong to the Inuit-Yupik group and share more similarities with each other than they do with Chukchi (Krauss et al. 2011)). A longtime home to these pronouncedly different peoples, the tundra-coastal ecosystems connecting the farthest northeastern and northwestern ends of Eurasia and North America—both washed by the Pacific and Arctic Oceans and the Bering and Chukchi Seas—are a shared foodshed for the people on both sides of the US-Russia border (e.g., Huntington et al. 2020a; Krupnik 1993; Melnikov and Zdor 2018).

With a variety of marine and tundra mammals, waterfowl, fish, and local fungi and flora among the main sources, we see a great deal of region-wide similarities in terms of dietary content. However, it is also the similarities in the culinary approaches, formal elements of how the food is served, and the etiquette of eating that make the *Bering Food Bridge* an expedient concept. As indicated by the firsthand accounts quoted at the start of the article, one's national belonging as a citizen of either Russia or the US does get cited as a factor. However, with the exception of the names of the foods and dishes, rarely are ethnic identities cited as a factor of a dietary preference or a difference in a culinary approach. In other words, it is very common to hear a Chukotka-Yupik or Chukchi person comment "this is [or that is not] how they make it on the 'other side,'" referring to variations in a dish prepared on both sides of the US-Russia border; and it is highly uncommon for a Yupik or Chukchi to regard someone's Inupiaq heritage as the reason for a novel feature of a dish that is familiar to either of the former and has been prepared by an Inupiaq. A fermented walrus roll in a Yupik

village in Alaska (where it is called *tuugtaq*) can look very similar to one in a Chukchi village in Chukotka (where it is called *kymgyt* or *k'opalgyn*, though strictly speaking, the latter is the word for the main ingredient of *kymgyt*, not the entire product). At the same time, the methods and sensory experiences of *tuugtaq/kymgyt* can differ quite noticeably between any two communities, even with the majority of the residents in both self-identifying as either Yupik, Inupiaq, or Chukchi. We shall delve into some particulars of that in a bit.

## Materials and Methods

We are a team of a broadly practicing visual artist (Igor) and a cultural anthropologist (Sveta), who conduct ethnographic fieldwork using participant observation, interviewing, and photo/videography to study foodways (social and cultural beliefs and practices surrounding food). The insights shared in this article were gathered in the course of field research carried out over the past two decades, during which Fairbanks, Alaska, has been our primary residence; the Bering Strait region and has become somewhat of our second home (many of our students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks come from there as well).

Spanning the topics of ethnomycology (Yamin-Pasternak 2007a-c, 2009, 2011), social and sensory relationships connected with traditional methods of fermentation (Yamin-Pasternak et al. 2014), the cultural history of coffee and tea (Yamin-Pasternak et al. 2017), culinary aesthetics (Kazmierski 2019; Mason 2019; Pasternak and Yamin-Pasternak 2019), mitigation of exposure to environmental contaminants through practices of cuisine (Dudarev et al. 2019a-d), and the spiritual practices connected with the tundra and plants (Yamin-Pasternak and Pasternak 2021), our ethnographic investigations in the Bering Strait communities mentioned here have always converged on questions of food and culture.

Our previous contributions to the Bering Strait scholarship (some of which we produced collaboratively as members of larger multi-disciplinary research teams (Dudarev et al. 2019a-d; Yamin-Pasternak et al. 2014, 2017; Yamin-Pasternak 2007a-c, 2009, 2011) delve into such topics as generational shifts in dietary preferences, social contexts of food preparation and consumption, local and Indigenous knowledge held by harvesters and preparers, concerns over environmental contaminants and health associated with locally harvested foods, food-related social stigma and cultural vitality issues, pertinent aspects of built environment and material culture, culinary innovations resulting from colonial and global influences, and broader human-environmental relationships surrounding the procurement, processing, preservation, and sharing of the foods eaten in the Bering Strait region of



Chukotka and Alaska. The current article, prepared for a regionally focused thematic issue of the journal *Études Inuit Studies*, aspires to add to that insight by envisioning the contemporary practices of Chukotkan-Alaskan cuisine among the Yupigiet, Inupiat, and Chukchi, as the *Bering Food Bridge*.

As an interdisciplinary endeavor, our ethnographic research is also artistic research, understood as “research conducted with artistic practice as its base and artistic practice as its object” (Efva 2015, 14); this definition is credited to sociologist Lars-Göran Karlsson, who is said to have offered it during a discussion between artists and other researchers.

Among the artistic practices at the base of our research in the Bering Strait was developing an art exhibition as one of the aims of our field ethnography. The interactive multi-sensory art installation *Aging with Change: Food Arts in the Bering Strait*, which included large-scale video projections, audio, a site-specific custom seating area, and copious amounts of foods contributed by Bering Strait families to be shared during the show with the visiting public, was presented at the 2018 Alaska Festival of Native Arts in Fairbanks (Fig. 2); in the following year, it was exhibited at the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum in Nome (Kazmierski 2019; Mason 2019; Pasternak and Yamin-Pasternak 2019), and several videography components of the show also traveled to the British Museum’s *Arctic: Culture and Climate* (Lincoln 2020).

Art, as both an academic discipline and a living practice in Bering Strait communities, is integral to our work. The central premise in our study of foodways is that, essential for sustenance, health, and nutrition, food is formally and conceptually art. As a researcher who is also a practicing artist, Igor approaches the assemblages of locally harvested products, purposefully cut and arranged on a drying rack, as site-specific installation (Fig. 3); a walrus roulade going through its various stages of fermentation as a multisensory sculpture (Fig. 4); and meal platters—be they custom and carved from wood or mass manufactured cafeteria trays—used at everyday mealtimes on both sides of the Bering Strait are a picture plane, painted with a mosaic of bite-size pieces of its menu items (Fig. 5). Similar to Joy Adapon (2008), author of *Culinary Art and Anthropology*, we “do not claim to have a formula or list of criteria for determining who is a culinary artist and who is an ordinary cook” and agree that “potential to culinary artistry is available to everyone who cooks” (2008, 85). In the case of the Bering Strait, we regard all steps that culminate in a meal—harvesting, processing, preserving (such as through the process of aging and fermentation, which also facilitate the desired texture, aroma, and taste), serving, etc.—as part of and an equivalent of cooking (see Mintz 2011 and Yamin-Pasternak et al. 2014 for a discussion of the concept of cooking in connection with Arctic foods prepared by the methods of aging and fermentation).





**Figure 2.** Exhibition of *Aging with Change: Food Arts in the Bering Strait*, presented at the 2018 Alaska Festival of Native Arts, University of Alaska Fairbanks Fine Arts Gallery. Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak, 2018.



**Figure 3.** Drying rack in Shishmaref, Alaska, filled with parts of a freshly butchered bearded seal. Photo by Igor Pasternak and Sveta Yamin-Pasternak, 2015.



**Figure 4.** Walrus roulade made in Gambell, Alaska. Photo by Igor Pasternak and Sveta Yamin-Pasternak, 2017.

It is relevant to emphasize that many Yupik, Inupiaq, and Chukchi explicitly refer to the culinary creations they make and/or consume as art, and point out the importance of the formal elements (color, texture, shape, etc.) while arranging the ingredients, serving, and eating. At the same time, it should be noted that Russian and English are used as our principal means of communication during our fieldwork, and that our research is being conducted in a time when both Chukotka and Alaska provide abundant access to televised cooking shows and other programming known colloquially as *food porn* (where food and food-related activity are presented in intentionally glamorized, visually enthralling ways). The idea of a chef as an artist is not uncommon to that context and we have not examined whether that may be an influence. Finally, it is imperative that we remember the seminal statement by Jeremy Coote that “the anthropological study of visual aesthetics has been hampered by an undue concentration on art and art objects” (1994, 245). Coote calls on researchers to be open to the everyday visual experiences



**Figure 5.** Communal meal platter served in Enmelen, Chukotka.  
Photo by Igor Pasternak and Sveta Yamin-Pasternak, 2015.

“which we all, not just the artists and art critics amongst us, experience and delight in” (ibid.).

We, in turn, take the liberty to expand on that to include other sensory aesthetics, such as those related to tactility and olfaction. It thus becomes less critical to establish how or whether Igor and Sveta think of food as art aligns with what our Yupik, Inupiaq, and Chukchi teachers of foodways mean when they use similar vocabulary. What is central to our purpose is that among a range of food-related considerations (such as nutrition and economic security of one’s family), the decisions driven by aesthetics, namely, decisions grounded in the personal and cultural ideas of beauty, have their prominent place in the course of harvesting, processing, preparing, sharing, serving, and consuming food.

Over the years, our scholarly and gastronomic interests in the foodways of the Bering Strait have helped foster lasting, often family-like relationships with our community-based teachers and hosts. On numerous occasions, our stay in a community on the Chukotkan or Alaskan shore coincided with a coming together of residents from both sides of the Bering Strait. A celebrated turn in recent Bering Strait history (Huntington 2020b; Ramseur 2017; Steinacher 2004), such visits were a bilaterally welcome change

following the decades of Cold War politics. Organized by individual families, and/or faith-based entities, and/or through various research and cultural programs from the late 1980s onward, these visits have become a regular occurrence in the social-cultural life of Bering Strait communities.

At the time of writing, Chukotkan-Alaskan travel has been largely on hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but in the twenty years prior, we would frequently find ourselves in the role of co-facilitators, contributors, and guests at events that brought together participants from Chukotka and Alaska. At times, these events simply coincided with the time of our stay in a Bering Strait community on either side. In several instances, we were tapped by either one of the Bering Strait families or an organization in charge of planning a trans-Beringian event to help out in a mixed capacity of educators, translators, and logisticians.

### **The Bering Food Bridge in Aging and Fermentation**

The photo in Figure 4, taken in 2016, shows a meat rack that belongs to a family in Gambell. The large item that stands out amidst the smallish cuts of drying meat is a freshly prepared *tuugtaq*: a walrus roulade made of a part of walrus that has been deboned and stitched together inside its own skin, with the heart, liver, and kidneys inside. The maker, a middle-aged man, explained: “This *tuugtaq* is an experiment. The kind we make is round, like a ball. My relatives on the other side like doing theirs with a flipper. I wanted to try. I have it on the rack for now and later it will go into the meat hole [a subterranean pit where a range of products is placed for a period of time for storage and fermentation]”.

The *tuugtaq* in the photo is thus a complex fusion. It is dependent upon a successful hunt and the post-harvest expertise in processing the animal, on the proper stitching together of all the parts into a roulade, and, in the words of Amber Lincoln, it requires “harnessing weather” (2020, 102) and the local physical terrain for the fermentation to properly do its work. Per the insight from the maker, this *tuugtaq* is also an experimental innovation emerging in the context of knowledge sharing among a Yupik kin network on the Chukotkan and Alaskan sides of the Bering Strait.

Like that of other aged foods, the making of *tuugtaq/kymgyt* utilizes the principles of fermentation that transform a substance into its subsequent product through the intervention of microbial enzymes. Provided with the enabling environment, these enzymes, liberated in the course of the destruction of cells, begin the digestion with the cellular components *in situ*. As a nod to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s luminary ruminations in *The Raw and the Cooked* (1969, 1978), Sidney Mintz (2011) fittingly named the foods achieved through the methods of fermentation as *the absent third*. The “absent” refers not to the food itself (which of course is present in abundance, especially



in the Arctic), but rather to the conceptual gap in the anthropological food scholarship.

Fermentation is used with a wide range of products derived from the local flora and fauna in the Bering Strait. Here we employ *tuugtaq/kymgyt* merely as an example to illustrate and elucidate the adaptation of the commonly held cultural knowledge on the subject of aged foods, a range of variation in knowledge and practices, and specific instances of innovation resulting from inter-community exchanges and the individual creativity of food artists in the Bering Strait.

Walrus products prepared using this method are consumed throughout the region, but the shape of the pit and the product is different in every village. In Shishmaref, the method is to layer large pieces of blubber and meat, cut into rectangular shapes. The bottom layer is placed with the skin facing the ground, opposite of the top layer, while the flippers, liver, heart, and other parts are sandwiched in between. A common type of a meat hole in this village is shallow and has to be dug anew for each use (few households have cellars built for long-term use adjacent to their residence). Clusters of this type of meat holes are found in communal areas of the village and are used for the processing of animal products used for food, hides, and tools and various other objects. The physical terrain around the village is relatively flat and the soils are sandy and clayish. After the pit is dug, the floor and sides are covered with cardboard, the meat is deposited, another layer of cardboard is placed on the top, and the hole is covered. We once participated in this process during the month of May, and we returned to Shishmaref in December of the same year to take part in the extraction process. The latter involved chiseling through the frozen ground, hooking the meat with long retriever poles and immediately peeling the skin off each piece while it was still soft, having just been taken out of the ground (Fig. 6).



**Figure 6.** Walrus at the start and end of the May-December fermentation process, Shishmaref, Alaska. Photos by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak and Igor Pasternak, 2016.

Other villages have their own adaptations for fermentation and storage. In Inalik/Little Diomede, the deep large meat holes are built of local rocks and are embedded within the terrain and residential architecture throughout the village. In 2017, a resident of Lavrentiya told us that during a 1991 stay with relatives on Little Diomede, he ate aged walrus prepared by the means he knew well, yet tasting noticeably different from what he was used to at home. “Because of the terrain there,” he explained, “their meat holes are made of rock and that affected the taste. I never forgot how different it tasted.”

We have previously noted (see Yamin-Pasternak *et al.* 2014) how closely such observations parallel the idea of *terroir* (the role of local climate and geography in shaping sensual qualities of food (Wiest and Schindler 2011)), used widely in the wine industry. In turn, others in Lavrentiya and Lorino have noted how different their aged walrus tastes from what they have sampled while visiting villages along the southern shore of the Chukotka Peninsula, where it is customary to let the walrus roulade sit in fresh water in the months prior to freeze-up. In Sireniki, for example, hunters proudly maintain their permafrost cellars located in the mound just above the beach, which they say have been in continuous use for thousands of years. Every year, as part of the maintenance work, the holes are filled with fresh water. Further west in the village of Enmelen, a resident actually built his meat hole so that it is fed by water from a passing spring. His reason, like those of other enthusiasts of the same technique, is a preference for the resulting taste, which is sweeter than that of a walrus roulade stored in a dry pit.

In Sireniki, rather than cutting walrus into square pieces, the lower part of the carcass is split into halves and made into the *tuugtaq* with the flipper intact (Fig. 7). That was the part of the method that the Gambell maker (introduced at the start of the section) decided to follow as part of that year’s experiment; all other examples of *tuugtaq* we have seen in the St. Lawrence Island villages of Gambell and Savoonga were made in a ball-like shape, with the flipper removed (Fig. 8). The other aspect of the experiment was the combined use of meat rack and ice cellar, that is, starting the fermentation processes by first hanging the roll on the meat rack and then depositing it into the latter for the longer-term aging and storage.

Not all aged foods go through a multi-month fermentation process. Some recipes take several days to several weeks. To implement these processes, the makers utilize a variety of vessels (wooden barrels, ceramic bowls, plastic buckets, stainless steel tubs, enamel tubs, cardboard boxes) and spaces (storage sheds, house entryways, cupboards, certain corners of their living quarters) that are part of their continuously adapting food infrastructures; these vary depending on the time of year, product, and individual creativities. Air drying is another major method of preserving food (Lincoln 2010). Drying racks of different sorts—those built as large



**Figure 7.** Meat hole and walrus roulade at the start of the fermentation process, Sireniki, Chukotka. Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak and Igor Pasternak, 2015.

freestanding outdoor structures, appendages mounted to the outer house walls, and indoor fixtures like a wooden bar suspended from the ceiling—are an essential part of the foodway infrastructure in many Bering Strait homes. Indoor drying racks are typically used for quicker projects, for example when frozen meat is thawed, sliced, and hung to make jerky; here, proper ventilation is a critical factor. Outdoor racks are a complex construction, often made of driftwood, with each log selected and positioned to serve a particular purpose. One section may be designated to hold the garlands of guts that have been turned inside out and rinsed prior to drying. Another section may be built to accommodate the heavy pieces of meat suspended or laid horizontally on top of a log, allowing space to maneuver between the different cuts when the maker needs to cut thicker pieces into scraps, scrape the fat bits off certain sections, or periodically flip over each piece to ensure a balanced exposure to sun and wind (Fig. 3).

Drying racks may also have intentionally positioned fixtures designated for drying stomachs, lungs, cheeks, and other parts that are not easily mounted or require a specific exposure to the elements. Some drying racks are built adjacent to a cache or shed where, in addition to tools and equipment, one may house the barrels or buckets of rendering blubber (from seal, walrus, or whale). Once the drying pieces are hung on the rack, the fat layer is stripped from the skin, and the selected pieces are placed into





**Figure 8.** Outside and inside of a meat hole in Savoonga, Alaska, with two walrus roulades and a flipper hung separately, all at the start of the fermentation process. Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak and Igor Pasternak, 2016.

buckets or barrels, where they are stirred daily while the blubber renders into oil. Oil of marine mammals, considered essential for most meals, is used as both an ingredient and a condiment (Lantis 1984). Like the subterranean spaces used for fermentation and storage, drying racks are architecturally designed with consideration for the local terrain, as well as for the culinary traditions of individual families. During intensive harvesting seasons, tending the meat rack is a daily and laborious task, performed predominantly by women.

Experimental combined use of wooden barrels and other fermenting vessels, utility spaces in and around the main living quarters, and electrical freezers for aging, drying, and long-term storage of foods have become

increasingly common over the years of our fieldwork in the Bering Strait. Certain products are consumed almost immediately upon extraction from their drying or fermenting environments. Some recipes also involve subsequent boiling or stewing, often in combination with other ingredients. When the fermented walrus described above is taken out of the cellar, it is sliced into steak-like pieces that include layers of meat and blubber; this step can be done on the snow directly next to the pit (Fig. 9). At mealtime, it is cut into bite-size pieces and, as is widely prescribed by the etiquette of consuming most local foods, is eaten using one's fingers.



**Figure 9.** Slices of a freshly extracted aged walrus roulade, ready to eat, Savoonga, Alaska. Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak, 2011.

## **Mealtimes Along the *Bering Food Bridge***

In the majority of mealtimes we have attended in a family setting, the meal commences when one of the leading chefs of the household announces that the food is ready. This takes place customarily once the ingredients are ready to be cut up for eating (rather than when they are already arranged on the platter). Others gather around and watch as the person in the center of the process slices the different pieces, in most cases using a knife known as *ulaq*, *pekul'*, and *ulu* in Yupik, Chukchi, and Inupiaq, respectively (Fig. 5).

Continuing to multi-task, while everyone else is eating, the main distributor will do more cutting and re-fill the platter several times over the course of the meal (with the exception of situations where only men are present, it is typically the mistress of the house who assumes the role of cutter).

For Igor, the approach to filling the meal platter is meaningfully comparable to filling a picture plane. Just as the elements of art (line, shape, space, texture, color, and value) are organized by the principles of harmony, variety, balance, proportion, movement, and rhythm, the shapes of the variably colored and textured pieces of fish and animal parts, seaweeds, and tundra greens create an enticing visual engagement right at the start of the meal and each time the platter is refilled.

While the visual component of any cuisine plays an important role in the overall experience of food and eating, the specific formal elements of the culinary aesthetic we have been studying dictate that a meal offers many different types of foods, which are to be eaten in a variety of combinations from one bite to the next. In demanding a much greater variety and combinations of food than, for example, what is found in most types of European meals, a quintessential Indigenous meal in the Bering Strait is, at the same time, far more permissive with respect to the number of menu options that can substitute each other independently while meeting the cultural expectations of a proper meal (Douglas 1972). Thus, contrasting the very few acceptable alternatives to the potato and bread—the inexorable components of a proper meal in our birth countries of Belarus (for Sveta) and Ukraine (for Igor)—the expected features of the expected features of a Bering Strait meal can be sourced from a great variety of locally harvested animals and plants. Such flexibility helps enhance food security, especially when individual eaters are open to experimenting with different combinations of foods and also have opportunities to eat at the homes of others and incorporate the observed creativity into their own future meals. Let us illustrate with this testimony captured in 2015 during a dinner in Enmelen:

We have families here who have been to Alaska. When we eat at their houses, we get ideas for making new kinds of combinations with our own Native foods. See how I will now grab a morsel of whale jerky, a couple of fireweed leaves, and a slice of *man'tak*? And then [just before ingesting] I dip this so-called sandwich into the walrus oil. Auntie 'spied' this combination at one of those houses!

That particular feast (served over a large table rather than a single platter) featured jerky-style pieces of whale and walrus, bite-size cuts of par-boiled walrus meat and of the crunchy layer of walrus that connects the skin to the blubber, thin frozen slices of sourdock (*Rumex arcticus*) being shaved continuously off a large block, *man'tak*, oil rendered from walrus blubber,

a savory green mash made of sourdock, with the addition of leaves of willow (*Salix arctica*) and *Rhodiola rosea* (functioning as a dipping condiment in the course of the meal), and an assortment of frozen ascidians that people had collected along the beach. Feeding a total of nine people aged 8 to 72, the entire procedure of commensality involved each participant ingesting a variety of plant-meat, gooey-crunchy, sweet-savory-sour, hot-frozen bite-size combos, all assembled and eaten using our fingers (Fig. 10). Meals having a less elaborate menu employ a similar eating etiquette, with fewer types of combinations (Jolles 2002; Starks 2011, 2007), echoing the prominent ruminations in food scholarship on the workings of the flavor principle (Rozin 1983) and notion of the proper meal (Douglas 1972).



**Figure 10.** Feasting in Enmelen, Chukotka. Photo by Igor Pasternak, 2015.

In Chukotka, with the overwhelming absorption of local mushrooms into the seasonal harvesting cycle and present-day Indigenous cuisines—a legacy of a Soviet-era cultural shift in attitudes toward mushrooms (Yamin-Pasternak 2007a-c, 2009)—Chukchi and Yupiget on the Russian side of the Bering Strait pickle some of the locally harvested plants. Indeed, it is common for the winter reserves of a Chukotkan household to feature plant foods preserved using long-standing traditional fermentation methods (aged in a barrel under a weight), fresh frozen (in households that have an electric freezer), and pickled in glass jars (Fig. 5) with a concoction of water, vinegar, garlic, cloves, and peppercorns, widely employed for mushrooms and vegetables in Russian and Eastern European cooking. While a number of fellow foodies on the Alaskan side of the Bering Strait have remarked on how strikingly the pickling method differs from their approaches, some local



specificities in the Alaska-based methods of making plant foods have also been duly noted by some Chukotkan chefs. One of these methods is making the sweet and savory dishes made with tundra greens denser than the consistency of a customary Chukotkan mash and serve them in a baking dish, cut into squares. To a North American eater, such execution will likely resemble a common way of serving various savory and sweet dishes, such as a portioned-out lasagna or brownie bars (Fig. 11).



**Figure 11.** Sweet and savory bars of tundra greens, Gambell, Alaska, Photo by Sveta Yamin-Pasternak, 2011.

## Concluding Remarks

Whether they originate in the Chukotkan-Alaskan knowledge exchange of ancestral culinary forms (as in the example with the *tuugtaq*) or in the broader practices of cuisine in Russia and the US (as in the examples with the plant foods), the mere facts of continuities and contrasts along the *Bering Food Bridge* do not come as much of a surprise. The value of such observations is in the contemplative opportunities they offer. It is the particulars of what gets noticed—what is articulated as either part of a shared Indigenous heritage or a marker of a national belonging, what is mindfully rejected or ardently absorbed into an everyday or special occasion

use, what is deployed when a particular food artist is seeking innovation or just succumbing to the investigative curiosity of experimenting within the regional influences and fusions—that make the *Bering Food Bridge* an incredibly generous space for learning about food and culture.

Scholars and artists of relational aesthetics—the artistic practices that arise from human relations and their social context—widely celebrate artist Rirkrit Tiravanija, whose gallery installation of a fully functioning pad thai kitchen has provocatively and effectively blurred the boundaries between food, art, and their sites of production (Dohmen 2013). Closer to our study region, Amber Lincoln (2011, 2019, 2020) embraces the making and use of food, as much as the making and use of tools and wares, as a material practice. Lincoln reminds us that in the Bering Strait and throughout the hunting and herding cultures of the Arctic, the making of what is eaten (fish, plant, and animal parts), what is worn and otherwise utilized (hides, fur, gut skins, grass-woven items, tools, dishware), and what is destined to function as art (antler and ivory carvings, basketry, a wide range of mixed-media arts) often materializes from the same source. It is in fact common in Bering Strait communities for food items and art objects to share an origin and be created and enjoyed in the same physical space. Here, we try to think beyond food and art (or culinary art and other kinds of art) as the adjacent domains of human activity, and rather ask, in the workings of food and culture, what do we stand to productively notice by letting the commensality along the *Bering Food Bridge* connect the anthropological and the artistic in our collaborative research.

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