

Nostalgia doesn't feed and generates algorithms

September 23, 2025 · Michele Kettmajer



In Japan, for months now, an unprecedented crisis has hit rice. First came the drought of 2023, then the massive return of post-pandemic tourism, followed by geopolitical tensions and fears of new natural disasters. The combination of these factors has drained supplies and driven prices sky-high. Rice is either unavailable or unaffordable. An agriculture minister had to resign after boasting about receiving rice as a gift. A young street food chef, famous for his onigiri, had to halt production. The rice shortage has become a political, cultural, and identity issue.

It always starts with a lack. Rice, in this case. But it could just as well be water, copper—or meaning. In Japan, the scarcity of *kome* has sparked more than just a food crisis: it has awakened a cultural obsession, an identity-driven rhetoric, and a narrative machine that concerns not just food, but power.

Rice, like carbonara in Italy, or couscous elsewhere, is not just nourishment. It's an algorithm of belonging. And when the fields don't yield, the nation rallies around the story. Borders are no longer drawn by walls or oceans, but by sensory grammars: a flavor, a texture, a gesture that separates "us" from "them."

When food becomes a system bug

In a country where AI is already deeply integrated into agricultural management, food logistics, and even cultural infrastructures—from school lunches to nationalist festivals—the rice shortage isn't just a system failure. It's a bug in the story Japan tells itself.

Food—like language, like identity—may need to become something else. Not a brand of purity, but an opportunity for plurality. Rather than reinforce a single, centralized, surveilled, nostalgic food identity, we should start envisioning a food ecology inspired by noodiversity and biodiversity: welcoming, blending, contaminating, adapting. A gastronomic ecosystem that reflects the hybridization of the world and the multiplicity of the cultures that inhabit it.

Because every identity-based menu, if imposed, is an algorithm of exclusion. Whereas every open kitchen is a living archive of encounters, errors, fermentations, and possibilities.

Algorithmic comfort in a time of scarcity

And as always, the system rushes to patch things up: more data, more sensors, more predictive models to stabilize supply chains and reassure the population. But not to open a political question about who decides what counts as local, who tells the past, who writes it into the code.

Gastronationalism is what happens when a material crisis—like a rice shortage—is absorbed into an identity narrative and turned into a political tool. The problem is no longer access to food, but the defense of "our" cuisine.

The daily act of eating becomes a symbolic gesture of belonging, and collective storytelling crystallizes into a selective memory, where only what confirms an idealized past is celebrated. And in this process, AI is not a neutral observer: it is already the engine of selection, the amplifier, the gatekeeper. It decides what is authentic, what is worth recommending, cooking, celebrating.

From borders to intersections

In this framework, food is no longer about connection but demarcation. Not about sharing but symbolic marking. Rice—a staple food, a national symbol, a resource in short supply—becomes the battleground where a whole algorithmic grammar of recognition is projected.

The national AIs that scan comment sentiment, track consumption, and design patriotic campaigns based on onigiri are not just technical tools: they are ideological devices. Manipulable oracles that return exactly the kind of comforting certainty we want to hear: “our rice, our land, our history.” Not because it’s true—but because it sounds right inside the algorithm of fear.

The alternative: a living, plural identity

But the alternative is not to eat Indian rice or put lab-grown meat in school bento boxes. It’s not about tradition vs. innovation as if they were opposing camps. The alternative is to change the language, to raise the stakes: not to defend identity as a relic, but to build it as a living web of evolving relationships.

If AI continues to be trained to recognize what is similar, familiar, authenticated by the loudest voices, then it will keep reproducing the same zones of exclusion, the same algorithms of suspicion.

But if we rethink AI as an ally of the margins, of cross-pollinations, of diverse communities that don’t seek recognition but room to express themselves, then it can become something else: a form of culinary diplomacy between regions, a grammar of care among differences, a porous intelligence that hungers not for roots, but for connections.

Not roots to defend, but rhizomes to grow

It's not about replacing rice with something else. It's about rewriting the very act of cooking. No longer identities that exclude, but practices that include—that move across cultures like fire in shared pots.

The intelligence we need is not the one that replicates the genealogy of a codified taste, but the one that recognizes in contamination a form of intimacy. Not roots to defend—but rhizomes to cultivate: foods that narrate, that migrate, that even fail.

An AI capable of learning from what ferments at the edges, not just from what's already been boxed and labeled as true. Because cooking, like thinking, is never a solitary act. And no recipe survives without new hands rewriting it.

Fonte: <https://www.ruralhack.org/en/food-identity-algorithms-and-gastronationalism/>