On curiosities, nostalgia & futurities

A study on the practice of conserving heritage crops and varieties in the Netherlands

Master thesis Resilient Farming & Foodsystems
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February 2025

Abstract

Amidst times of the large-scale extinction of bio-cultural diversity, an increasing number of movements have organized around the conservation of heritage crops and varieties as a means of contesting global industrial food systems. Heritage crops can be understood through the concept of bio-cultural heritage: the place-based and dynamic ecosystems derived from interaction between cultural and biological diversity (Bridgewater & Rotherham, 2019). However, conservation pathways are notably heterogeneous, with different practitioners adhering to distinct, and sometimes conflicting, narratives about why and how conservation should take place.

This research examines the overlapping and conflicting narratives within heritage crop conservation in the Netherlands. The field of bio-cultural heritage conservation is undergoing a paradigm shift that is increasingly shaped by the logics of sustainable development (Bortolotto, 2024). Whereas bio-cultural heritage traditionally is conserved with an emphasis on the past, resisting change, contemporary conservation efforts are increasingly framed through sustainability discourse, emphasizing the future and actively fostering change. This thesis explores this shift through qualitative research methods, including participant observation, interviews, and art-based research methods, which were used to facilitate an unconventional focus group. This thesis studies the implications of these different narratives at play in the field of bio-cultural conservation and explores the possibilities for understanding heritage crops as situated knowledges.

Keywords: *bio-cultural heritage, heritage crops, genetic resources, sustainable development, nostalgia, taste, art-based research methods*

Illustration on front page front page by Toos Marie Hartog, commissioned for the Ark of Taste NL. Font "ERF/GOED" written by the author.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is a product of the incredible help of many people. First and foremost, I want to thank my dear friends Maya and Lucas, with whom I worked on a rewarding and surprising event for this thesis; we travelled across the country, visited different farmers and spent many hours together designing, discussing and writing. I am grateful for their patience in listening to all my contemplations on heritage crops, and amazed by their creative talent for design, cooking, and storytelling. They have made this research project feel like something shared.

Also, I want to thank all the people that hosted and welcomed me to their farms, homes and offices during the past months. I've been welcomed with home-made pie, I've joined initial strangers for lunch, and I received tours of places in which people spend the majority of their days. After numerous visits, I went home with gifted beetroots, kale, pears, beans, marmalades, home-brewed drinks and many more fascinating foods that I did not know before. I am moved by the willingness of people to share their time and vision and helping, inviting and introducing me to the field of bio-cultural heritage.

Furthermore, I want to thank the inspiring anthropologist Chiara Bortolotto who granted me the manuscript of her work "Will Heritage Save Us?" just before the initial publication date so that I could still access it in time. Her book has been a very valuable contribution to my understanding of the field.

Lastly, I want to thank Oona Morrow for her supervision and the space and confidence she gave me to take unconventional paths within this research.

The last six months have been insightful, uncertain, surprising, adventurous and sometimes very unexpected. Besides this thesis, this period has generated new connections, new projects and new inspiration for the future for which I am grateful and curious for what is yet to come.

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Introduction

mapping an agricultural heritage landscape

"Heritage as a witness of history and a promise of a constant order amidst continual change" – Bessière, 2013

Today's Dutch agricultural landscape can be understood through a loss of diversity. When crossing the Netherlands by train, one is most probably faced with either grasslands, onions, sugar beet, corn for silage or maybe barley as a break crop (Smit & Jager, 2018). The agricultural landscape of the Anthropocene is characterized by homogenization, industrialization and an increased corporate control driven by extractive modes of production and consumption (Cavaliere & Branstrator, 2024). The Dutch bio-cultural diversity – the place-based and dynamic ecosystems derived from interaction between cultural and biological diversity - found within agricultural regions is threatened nationally due to power concentrations of agribusiness and corresponding unsustainability , dynamics that are also at play in the rest of the world (Bridgewater & Rotherham, 2019). The agricultural "Green Revolution" of the 1960's characterized the agricultural developments in the Netherlands: it promoted high yielding cultivars that replaced landraces and the destruction of the habitats of crop wild relatives (Khoury et al., 2022). The abandonment of traditional farming practices has resulted in a dominant form of agriculture that is dependent on high levels of external inputs and vulnerable to political and environmental shocks (Agnoletti & Santoro, 2022). While the replacement of traditional and locally developed varieties to high yielding crops in the Netherlands has been successful in generating highly productive agriculture and cheap foods, it has come at a great cost for biodiversity (Bos et al., 2013). The modernization and globalization of agriculture has induced a loss of bio-cultural knowledge from the collective memory of both producers and consumers (Mariani et al., 2021) As a result of this unprecedented change, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) coined the term 'genetic erosion' to describe the dramatic loss of genetic 'resources' (Khoury et al., 2022). Of the thousands of plant species that have been agriculturally cultivated throughout human history, today, just nine plants account for 66% of total crop production (Pilling & Bélanger, 2019). As a response to these developments within contemporary Dutch agricultural landscapes, an increasing number of initiatives have emerged that organize themselves around the re-localization of foodscapes and the conservation of bio-cultural diversity; from worldwide gene banks to activist groups to gastronomic food-circles.

What these initiatives share is that they are part of a larger movement that turns to heritage crops and varieties as a site to resist industrial food systems. However, although these different initiatives are working within the same field, different initiatives vary greatly in approach and underlying values. Among the groups active in the conservation of agricultural heritage, there are significant differences in the understanding of why heritage crops need to be conserved. Heritage crop conservation is both motivated by the anxiety of loss, the longing for rootedness and the urge for sustainable development amidst times of life-threatening biodiversity loss (Bortolotto, n.d.). This tells us that the conservation of traditional agricultural landscapes and its corresponding crops and varieties is not straightforward but built on greatly different diverging truths of why heritage crops need to be conserved. The driving force for the conservation of heritage crops and varieties can be situated on the spectrum of conservative or progressive, past-orientated or future-focused,

nostalgic or pragmatic. These heritage narratives can be both exclusive, nostalgic and can stem from neoliberal logics. In an era of bio-cultural extinction and political polarization amidst the ruins of global capitalism, in which agricultural heritage is finding itself increasingly in the political arena of rethinking food systems, it is important to investigate the dynamics of the conservation of heritage. The different narratives within the conservation of agricultural heritage will be explored to keep investigating and disentangling complex tendencies and ambiguities of ideologies (Benoist, 2023). Within this thesis, the similarities and discrepancies between the different narratives around agricultural heritage amongst different groups and institutions in the Netherlands will be set forth to understand the implications for the conservation of agricultural heritage through studying the values, beliefs, meanings and ideologies that are shaping heritage.

The Netherlands is an insightful context for rural sociologists to study the conservation of bio-cultural heritage, as the Netherlands has lost most of its food heritage as a result of early and thorough industrialization and the effects of rationing during and after the Second World War (Phillipov & Kirkwood, 2018). The Dutch agricultural landscape is characterized by a strong focus on export and intensification in which few traditional agricultural landscapes and practices have persisted (Bos et al., 2013; Striekwold & Fokkema, 2023). The Netherlands is the world's second largest agricultural exporter, which is often celebrated in popular discourse with "the Netherlands feeds the world" (National Geographic, 2022). Therefore, it is insightful to study how agricultural heritage is valued and conserved amidst the grand narratives of intensification and mechanization within a highly industrial agricultural landscape. There can be different narratives around heritage at play simultaneously: Heritage as a regional identity marker amidst the excesses of globalization, heritage as a genetic resource for sustainable development projects and heritage as an arena for anti-modernity projects. There has been little qualitative research done on the bio-cultural heritage narratives amongst different practitioners within the Netherlands and the implications of varying heritagization discourses. Within existing research on heritage crops, scholars have predominantly focused on the global south in contexts where heritage crops remain a part of agriculture. This contrasts to the context of the global north in which heritage crops are generally associating with home leisure gardening, gastronomy and heritage visitor sites (Wincott, 2018). The politics of heritage crop conservation the Dutch context has therefore been understudied. Nevertheless, there is a growing interest and urgency globally among activist networks, retailers, campaigners, governmental agencies, researchers and gene banks in rethinking the food system through heritage crops. To illustrate: the Dutch broadcasting corporation (NOS) published a call for heritage crops in the summer of 2024, which exemplifies how heritage crops are finding their way in popuar discourse: *"Wanted: long hollowweed, Delft greenfoot and thick Leidsche winter for seed bank*" (NOS, 2023). Heritage practitioners within this research have also expressed a sense of momentum for joining forces across institutional and organizational boundaries to establish new platforms dedicated to the conservation of heritage crops. This increasing public attention, underscores the relevance of contributing to the understanding of the dynamics of heritage crop conservation in the Dutch context.

There is an urgency of understanding the differences and parallels between the narratives produced by different practitioners within the living heritage field. To address this, I will explore the question: "What are the narratives surrounding the conservation of bio-cultural heritage in the Netherlands?"

I will approach this question in different steps. First, I will provide a contextual foundation by examining contemporary debates on the definition of bio-cultural heritage and identifying key heritage practitioners within the Dutch landscape. Second, within the theoretical framework, I will introduce a paradigm shift at play in thinking about bio-cultural heritage, drawing on, besides the work of different scholars, the work of the anthropologist Bortolotto (2024) who studied how intangible cultural heritage is subjected to and shaped by notions of sustainable development. Thirdly, I will outline the research methods I used to conduct qualitative research among heritage practitioners. The findings are then presented in two analytical chapters: the first focuses on past-oriented narratives amongst bio-cultural heritage practitioners, while the second examines narratives that emphasize the future as a temporal dimension. I will conclude with a discussion on the implications of these different narratives for bio-cultural heritage practitioners.

Finally, I have supplemented the chapters with a few textual intermezzos in which I highlight specific stories of heritage crops that I have encountered throughout this project. This is an experiment in how to let the crops I have worked with, those central to this research, speak for themselves.

Context

Specifying bio-cultural heritage and its practitioners

This chapter provides context and a literature review on various conceptualizations of bio-cultural heritage. Bio-cultural heritage is continuously redefined by both scholars as heritage practitioners. Additionally, the chapter examines the key actors, networks, and institutions that shape the landscape of bio-cultural heritage, establishing and delineating the field of this research. With this chapter, I aim to provide the necessary background in understanding the realm of bio-cultural heritage.

Situating heritage

Agricultural bio-cultural heritage covers a wide field, including landscape elements, traditional practices, monumental farms, mills, hedges, and sheds. However, in this research, I will specifically focus on the conservation of heritage crops and varieties due to their pivotal role in a changing food system as the necessity of narrowing the scope of this thesis. There is no single agreed definition of heritage crops and varieties within academic literature, but the term is applied to older varieties that are rejected by mainstream industrial production and that are landraces rather than hybrids (Phillipov & Kirkwood, 2018). Landraces are crops that have developed unique characteristics adapted to the microclimate of the agricultural context due to on-farm selection by farmers and therefore represent a strong relationship to the biological, cultural and socio-economic landscape in which they emerged (Conversa et al., 2020). Hybrid crops are seeds that have been patented by plant breeding companies and are developed in highly specialised conditions that are genetically uniform and cannot be reproduced in the field (Wincott, 2015)

There are numerous ways to refer to heritage crops: as bio-cultural, intangible, living, agricultural, food, culinary and gastronomic heritage. Different concepts imply different meanings. In the field, terminology to refer to heritage crops appropriately proved to be often disorientating amongst participants. Therefore, in this section, I will highlight the different ways of describing heritage to explain what standpoint I take by employing the term 'bio-cultural'. Bio-cultural heritage can be seen as the result of long-term biological and social relationships, shaping the biological and material features of the landscape, experience and knowledge (Lindholm & Ekblom, 2019). Following, the concept of intangible cultural heritage was introduced by the UNESCO convention in the early 2000s with the key objective of promoting cultural diversity at times of globalization and cultural homogenization and refers to the social and cultural practices that communities recognize as their heritage (Bortolotto, 2006). In the context of bio-cultural diversity, intangible heritage refers to the knowledges, practices and traditions around heritage crops. Intangible cultural heritage conservation is often characterized by a participatory approach, and as conceptualized by Lenzerini (2011), as all the immaterial manifestations of culture. Intangible cultural heritage is now increasingly substituted by 'living heritage', a term that has gained in popularity over the last decades in heritage discourse. It is associated with the continuity of heritage that plays a significant role in the contemporary world (Antomarchi et al., 2018). This changing conceptualization from intangible to living heritage marks a shift in which heritage is no longer merely understood in terms of objects, but rather, is seen as consisting of living, continuous processes (Bortolotto, 2007). This changing paradigm is embodied in the FARO convention of 2005, which was adopted by the Council of Europe. It was explicitly stated that heritage conceptualization is no longer expert-driven, but moving towards

a more inclusive, community-centered perspective (Vícha, 2014). Lastly, Zocchi et al., (2021) have conceptualized the different categories of food, agri-food, culinary and gastronomic heritage. In the table below they have set forth the different and overlapping meanings and conceptualizations characterizing heritage.

Concept	Main Features
Food Heritage	• Agricultural products, ingredients, dishes, and cooking implements • Techniques and recipes • Symbolic dimension of food (e.g., table manners and rituals) • Eating practices, food-related behaviours, and beliefs • Shared legacy and common good
Agri-food heritage	• Agricultural products, • Production practices and traditional knowledge • Rootedness in rural and marginal areas (expressed by the category terroir)
Culinary heritage	• Ingredients, cooking accoutrements, and recipes ((corpus of culinary elements and stong emphasis on practices) • Tastes, smells, and eating traditions • Ethnic, national, and political dimensions • Socialability, legacy, identity, tradition and sense of belonging
Gastronomic heritage	• Products, practices, and knowledge related to the cultivation, harvesting and conservation of agricultural products • Ingredients, cooking utensils, and recipes (corpus of culinary elements and strong emphasis on practices) • Ethnic, national, and political dimensions • Sociability, legacy, identity, tradition, and sense of belonging

Figure 1 - the different categories of food, agri-food, culinary and gastronomic heritage (Zocchi et al., 2021)

These varying conceptualizations demonstrate the difficulties of clearly defining the boundaries of heritage in the realm of food and agriculture. Within this thesis, I will adhere to the term bio-cultural heritage to describe the heritage crops and varieties my practitioners work with as it highlights the interplay between humans, non-humans and the landscape in which heritage crops have derived. Also, the term bio-cultural heritage is officially used to refer to heritage crops by the center for genetic resources at Wageningen University and Research (Wageningen University & Research, n.d.). Furthermore, I will occasionally use the term agricultural and living heritage to refer to heritage crops when participants describe heritage crops as such (Lindholm & Ekblom, 2019).

Heritage practitioners within the Netherlands

Heritage practitioners can be understood ‘the people who appropriately safeguard and transmit intangible cultural heritage to the next generation’ (Kim et al., 2019). Within this thesis I will continually refer to heritage ‘practitioners’ to refer to participants who work with heritage crops in diverse ways. Inside the context of the Netherlands, there are numerous practitioners that have organized themselves around the conservation of agricultural food heritage; both institutionalized as informal and activist. Within this research, my starting points were the networks of the Dutch Ark of Taste (Slow Food Nederland, n.d.) and the Center for Genetic Resources Wageningen (CGN) (Wageningen University & Research, n.d.). During the fieldwork period it became clear that these

networks partially overlap and have previously been active in the same initiatives. Therefore, they have served as adequate entry points to the field. Both networks can be regarded as heritagization institutions, by setting the criteria for and producing discourse around heritage.

Firstly, I will highlight the Ark of Taste. The Ark of Taste is an initiative of the global Slow Food movement. It is an international, open-source, bottom-up inventory of culinary and agricultural heritage at the risk of extinction. The Ark of Taste is presented as a project of biodiversity restoration, in which the objective is to 'protect the small producers from the deluge of industrial standardization, to ensure the survival of endangered varieties' (Petrini, 2003). Its focus is on preserving history, local knowledge and heritage through products that are under the threat of extinction (Fontefrancesco, 2023). Within the Ark of Taste, heritage is described as agricultural and culinary heritage (Slow Food Nederland, n.d). The Ark of Taste is founded upon the premise that documentation and promotion of the consumption of bio-cultural heritage is the starting point for safeguarding this particular heritage (Fontefrancesco et al., 2022). It is therefore not solely a catalogue of gastronomic heritage, but also a political manifesto and an instrument against standardization and industrialization (Fontefrancesco et al., 2022; Lotti, 2010; Littaye, 2015). Every country has set up their own Ark of Taste, such as *Ark van de Smaak* in the Netherlands. The Ark contains animal breeds, vegetable varieties, preserves, cheeses and other food products, listing more than 5000 products from over 140 countries. The requirements for an agricultural or culinary product of the Ark of Taste are firstly that the product should be connected to a specific region and corresponding regional knowledge, secondly that the products must be produced on a small scale, thirdly that the products must be threatened in their existence, fourthly that the product must be available somewhere, and lastly that the product must have a specific quality in terms of taste (Slow Food Nederland, n.d.).

The requirements that the Ark of Taste sets for their products can be read through the lens of the debate on the 'quality turn' in food literature (Goodman et al., 2014). Within this debate, the transition is being described from the industrial world and its standardized norms of quality and the embedded, domestic world characterized by trust, tradition and place (Goodman et al., 2014) politics of quality are concerned with the question of who defines how food is grown and by whom. Nevertheless, this "turn" has been contested thoroughly by exposing the constructed nature of quality and place. The quality turn has enhanced the commodification of practices like habitat conservation, biodiversity and sustainable farm environments. Through this, the turn to quality has become a basis of competition in food provisioning. This is illustrated by Lotti (2010) in which she describes how the quality of Ark of Taste products is assessed. As Slow Food describes "good taste" for a criterion for inclusion, Slow Food attempts to make taste more objective by classifying it as good which is then commodified (Lotti, 2010)

Secondly, I will outline the CGN. The CGN is an independent research unit from Wageningen University and Research and is appointed by the Dutch government as a statutory research task (Zijlstra et al., 2013). The CGN maintains a gene bank aimed at documenting and safeguarding genetic information from crops, animals and trees. The CGN is an example of a seedbank part of a global strategy that emerged from the 1960's for the conservation of crop plants as a gene pool for future crop improvements (Wincott, 2017). This became necessary as botanists and experts in the emerging field of begun collecting and recording trait diversity in crop plants for crop breeding (Loskutov, 1999). The CGN is a telling example of an ex-situ gene bank that has complex economic implications as it is of high importance in the modern plant breeding industry whilst also attempting to maintain biodiversity (Wincott, 2017). The CGN refers to bio-cultural heritage when describing heritage crops and varieties (Wageningen University & Research, n.d.). The CGN provides its crop-,

animal- and tree samples to researchers, seed-breeding companies and interested hobbyists and collaborates with both research institutes and commercial parties to multiply their collections. One of the projects of the CGN is the launch of the "Orange List", referencing to the Red List with endangered species (Zijlstra et al., 2013). The Orange List features crops from 1850 – 1950 that fell into disuse along with agricultural intensification and industrialization. The Orange List contains 4500 vegetable varieties.

Both the Ark of Taste and the CGN are connected with different producers, seed growers and multipliers who are working with agricultural heritage crops and varieties, as well as with governmental institutions such as the state department for cultural heritage. Besides the CGN and the Ark of Taste, the landscape of actors working with living heritage in the Netherlands is extremely dispersed and versatile. It is a mosaic of official organizations and also of numerous historical gardens, seed distributors, volunteer working groups, farmers and interested individuals. Several groups are greying, and other organizations have fallen apart due to discontinuities within volunteers and differences in perspectives and narratives. A telling example of a stopped initiative is the Oerakker, a platform facilitated by the CGN dedicated to the conservation and distribution of heritage crops, in which Ark of Taste members also took part (Kik et al., 2019). Despite the struggle of the Oerakker, former members of this initiative have played a vital role in this research and showed willingness to participate in interviews and events.

Acknowledging that within the timeframe of a MSc thesis it is not feasible to include all actors within the landscape of agricultural heritage conservation, considering that heritage crops- & varieties conservation takes place informally and within private spheres too, this thesis attempts to give a comprehensive overview of different narratives at play within the realm of agricultural heritage in the heritage landscape. The two networks that I initially prioritized during my fieldwork period, the Ark of Taste & the CGN, are not so much all-encompassing representatives for the field but embody important domains within heritage conservation: institutional and research centered safeguarding of heritage on the one hand, and grassroots and citizen-led conservation on the other. Both networks are interlinked with different, also individual, practitioners. Therefore, these networks as starting points for my research have enabled me to reach out to a versatile group of participants, consisting out of both agrarians, researchers, networkers and governmental institutions. The dispersed and heterogenous landscape of agricultural conservation in the Netherlands has been taken as a research site to conduct multi-sited qualitive fieldwork.

Theoretical Framework

Theorizing bio-cultural heritage

In this theoretical framework, I examine the evolving concept of bio-cultural heritage from a sociological perspective, focusing on its temporal, spatial, and socio-political dimensions. I explore how bio-cultural heritage is shaped both by traditional heritage discourses and by the logics of sustainable development, which can extend capitalist growth imperatives into a "green heritage" model (Bortolotto, 2024). To unpack these dynamics, I explore the differences between conservation and safeguarding, analyze the shifting role of the local in heritage practices, and apply Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus to examine how heritage knowledge and taste function as forms of distinction. This framework serves as a conceptual foundation for understanding the broader implications of sustainability-driven heritage discourse.

Heritage conservation – emphasizing the past

In the context of bio-cultural heritage, heritagization is the process of assigning new values to traditional crops and varieties through the reconstruction of historical narratives. This process often evokes nostalgia for pre-capitalist modes of production, shaping contemporary food politics and serving diverse actors' interests (Phillipov & Kirkwood, 2018). From a traditional perspective, heritage functions as a claim to a shared history, establishing continuity between generations and a connection to the past. Its preservation enables groups to differentiate themselves and construct identities rooted in specific historical narratives (Bortolotto, 2024). Within this conception of bio-cultural heritage conservation, change is resisted to ensure that future generations can represent themselves as coming from a particular past. In this understanding, heritage is closely tied to tradition, serving as a temporal marker. Scholars have argued that this nostalgic framing can align with reactionary and nationalist discourses, as food practices become tools for identity construction and national heritage formation. Within this framework, the past is often portrayed as fixed, superior, and more diverse, reinforcing a sense of continuity across generations (Wincott, 2015). This perception is frequently driven by concerns over loss and endangerment, amplifying anxieties about disappearing cultural landscapes. Heritagization can thus operate as a site of cultural propertization. Grasseni (2017) describes this dynamic as a highly competitive market where idealized rural landscapes and images of authentic production serve as marketing tools. Similarly, Cavanaugh (2023) characterizes heritage foods as products of capitalism: while they respond to the limits of global capitalism and the erosion of diversity, they are simultaneously shaped by market forces and profit incentives.

Authenticity has emerged as a dominant narrative for artisanal producers and bio-cultural heritage conservationists seeking differentiation in global markets. However, authenticity within heritage crops is an inherently ambiguous concept. The FARO Convention can be understood as presenting authenticity as a democratic and relational process, allowing communities to define their own heritage. Conversely, authenticity can also function as an exclusionary mechanism, reinforcing both social and geographic boundaries. Food heritage certifications, such as PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) and PGI (Protected Geographical Indication), while promoting local traditions, can restrict market access and privilege certain groups (Cavanaugh, 2023). Although local food movements

encompass diverse agricultural practices and bio-cultural heritage perspectives, they also produce exclusionary politics (Dupuis & Goodman, 2005). As a result, authenticity can serve as a hardener of borders, distinguishing those perceived "authentic" from those who are not (Porciani, 2019a). It is therefore essential to critically examine heritage and localism discourses to uncover their broader implications. Among communities that celebrate heritage as a political response to industrialization and globalization, localism is often framed as inherently superior to globalized food systems. However, scholars have pointed to the challenges associated with promoting localism through concepts such as terroir and origin-based labels, including the Ark of Taste (Feagan, 2007). Like heritage foods, localism remains contested, as its meanings and consequences are neither fixed nor universally beneficial (Benoist, 2023). The popularization of "local" often rests on utopian visions of food systems that assume inherent alignment with pre-defined normative values (Goodman et al., 2014). Within this narrative, food localism is framed as a way to re-embed food within local ecologies, fostering a sense of recovered community (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). In this sense, localism parallels heritagization as a counter-hegemonic response to globalization, urging movements to reclaim power through spatial and temporal dimensions.

While localist solutions aim to address the injustices of globalized industrial capitalism, neither localism nor heritage is inherently more just or egalitarian. This parallel highlights the boundaries and strategies through which authenticity is constructed. Zygmunt Bauman (2001) describes the search for locality and authenticity as a reaction to globalization's pressures, reinforcing divisions within contemporary society. Romanticized visions of the local can lead to exclusionary and elitist practices, at times appealing to nativist sentiments rooted in Eurocentric rural imaginaries (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). The assumption that localization inherently leads to justice or sustainability is increasingly scrutinized, as scholars argue that localism does not necessarily foster democratic or equitable communities but can also produce exclusion and inequality (Purcell & Brown, 2005). Within heritagization and localist projects, nostalgia for a pre-industrial and pre-globalized past constructs an idealized rural-national identity (Porciani, 2019b). This nostalgia suggests an imagined past in which the present is perceived as a decline. Food traditions contribute to a sense of community and belonging, crossing social boundaries while simultaneously reinforcing exclusion (Porciani, 2019b). Food serves both as a personal and national symbol, shaping classifications that distinguish "insiders" from "outsiders" and reinforcing hierarchies of taste. The emotional connection between food and belonging can thus be leveraged in political mobilization, underscoring the ways in which agricultural and culinary heritage discourses shape social and cultural identities. The imagined pre-industrial past embedded in these narratives highlights the constructed nature of authenticity and its political implications.

Ultimately, traditionalist heritagization is driven by the desire for stability and historical continuity (Littaye, 2015). The heritage practitioners consulted in this research can be understood as institutions of heritagization, setting criteria and shaping the discourse around food heritage. Through conceptualization and promotion, heritage discourse elevates certain foods from marginal to prominent status in gastronomy and popular culture (Phillipov & Kirkwood, 2018). Heritage, as an ideological project, navigates complex entanglements of temporality, shaped by actors with intersecting and conflicting objectives (Littaye, 2015). For example, Slow Food’s Ark of Taste establishes selection criteria that define what is considered traditional, authentic, and worthy of preservation (Littaye, 2015). In doing so, it constructs a curated heritage landscape, where diversity is transformed into a homogenized product under a universalized framework. This heritage discourse, particularly through the Ark of Taste, evokes an image of a protective ship conserving

humanity's culinary heritage from the "flood" of globalization and industrialization (Petrini, 2003; Littaye, 2015). This imaginary heritagization reinforces dualisms: tradition versus modernity, past versus present, and nature versus technology. This highlights the ideological underpinnings of food heritage narratives.

Taste & heritage as distinction

Whilst pursuing continuity between past and present through the conservation of bio-cultural heritage, heritage crops can also be read as a form of expression and social differentiation (Bessière, 2013). 'Taste' is another crucial element in understanding the social structures in which heritage crops are embedded. A reoccurring dynamic within celebrated heritage foods, is that they are very often 'poor man's foods' that have been turned into gastronomic rarities. Wincott (2018) writes: "*heritage food discourse … shames the working-class food of the present by celebrating its supposed past"* (Wincott 2018, 67). Here questions around class and power structures emerge. In understanding the co-optation of heritage foods by certain classes, the concept of habitus by Bourdieu (1984) serves as a helpful framework.

Bourdieu describes taste as a crucial element of social distinction and therefore part of the cultural capital apparatus (Bourdieu, 1984). Habitus is explained as a mediator between the social structures and the individual (Meissner, 2017). Habitus shapes individuals' perceptions, preferences, and behaviors based on their social background, making certain tastes feel 'natural' while reinforcing class-based distinctions. Taste is partially developed by the individual but is largely shaped through social class. In the case of heritage food, taste is therefore not only acquired by means of the personal preference and the tastebuds, but requires cultural capital. Bourdieu would argue that it involves knowledge of what makes food a heritage food and the capacity to access the quality of heritage foods. A taste for heritage also resembles an interest and distinction by appreciating atypical shapes, colors, preparation methods of heritage foods. Heritage foods are largely celebrated for an intensity of taste, which contributes to their status of superior foods and the superiority of individuals who can distinguish the complexity and intensity of heritage foods, in comparison to modern, industrial and standardized tastes. The attention and care add value to heritage produce and is available to consumers who can afford the extra cost or can invest their own time and knowledge in growing and preparing heritage fruits and vegetables. Bourdieu (1984) argues that taste both unites and divides: while heritage food movements foster a sense of belonging among their adherents, they also implicitly define outsiders by their lack of familiarity with or appreciation for heritage foods. Therefore, the notion of taste is a means for understanding how practitioners discursively and materially construct heritage crops and how taste is both classifying and reinforcing differences between social classes. The taste of others, others who aren't knowledgeable about the realm of heritage crops, can be positioned as inadequate or illegitimate; a distaste for the mass-produced, the undifferentiated and the widely available (Wincott, 2015). This set of acquired tastes and knowledge forms one's habitus, reinforcing the relationship between learned distinctions and taste. Acquiring knowledge and taste for heritage foods can grant access to communities where political food causes are accepted. This dynamic is relevant in food heritage activism, where taste functions as both a political and aesthetic category. By describing heritage foods through taste, organizations like Slow Food establish a framework where certain flavors and preparation methods become markers of authenticity, reinforcing their cultural and political significance. Slow Food

emphasize a connection between pleasure, sustainability, and tradition, framing heritage food consumption as a conscious, ethical choice. However, as heritage foods gain recognition, their exclusivity is reinforced through institutional mechanisms. For example, to be included in the Ark of Taste, a product must be classified as endangered, effectively turning scarcity into a marker of value. This classification process repositions otherwise common crops and varieties as rarities worthy of preservation, contributing to their distinction from mass-market alternatives.

Within this research, taste serves as a critical lens for analyzing how heritage foods are discursively framed and materially valued. Taste is not just a passive marker of distinction but an active agent in the conservation of heritage crops. Whether and how taste is emphasized within heritage discourse provides insight into the underlying power structures that shape the heritagization of food.

Heritage safeguarding – emphasizing the future

Today has been called the age of "sustainable development" (Sachs, 2015). The definition of sustainability is relative and culturally determined and contested, but the broad consensus aligns sustainability with three key pillars: people, planet, and profit (Bortolotto, 2015). The growing 'sustainabilization' or 'climatization' within heritage discourse is a powerful yet uneven social process in which climate change is increasingly becoming the frame of reference for the mediation and hierarchization of other global issues, including heritage (Aykut & Maertens, 2021). Heritage conservation has traditionally been associated with resisting change. However, contemporary heritage safeguarding is no longer merely about preserving relics from the past; instead, it is increasingly seen as a forward-looking strategy in which change lies at heart of heritage safeguarding, ensuring that future generations have the resources to navigate an uncertain and rapidly evolving world. In the sustainable development of heritage, loss does not concern things of the past, but heritage safeguarding now mostly emphasizes the *future* consequences of loss (Bortolotto, 2024). The past is no longer valued primarily for its historical continuity, but as a resource that offers experiential knowledge to address present and future challenges. This perspective reframes heritage not as a means of reinforcing historical identity, but as a pragmatic tool for adaptation and innovation (Bortolotto, 2024).

As already set forth, heritage conservation has largely revolved around the fear of change which has created a necessity to preserve (Bortolotto, 2024). This call upon continuity and resisting change has also shaped rural development programs throughout the continent through, for example, PDI schemes. These development programs have revolved around attempts to reverse depopulation and marginalization of rural areas, through actions aimed at improving essential services and triggering local development processes (Basile & Cavallo, 2020). However, since bio-cultural heritage is increasingly found in *sustainable* development discourse, there is a strong focus on the future in which change is fostered rather than resisted. In this shifting paradigm, heritage crops are a resource to counter-act the "genetic erosion" as set forth by the FAO and in which agricultural and food heritage is conceptualized as a genetic resource that can foster sustainable economic development (Meissner, 2017). This marks a fundamental shift in perspective: Agricultural heritage is no longer solely nostalgically regarded as a fragile relic in need of preservation, but as a resource for the future with new purposes and a potential to address broader concerns of food security and genetic diversity (Bortolotto & Ubertazzi, 2018). In this shift, heritage is moving away from an object

of protection, towards a scenario in which humans themselves are in need of protection (Bortolotto, 2024). This shift transforms heritage narratives and thinking about agricultural heritage. Bortolotto (2024) describes that this sustainabilization has induced two major shifts: In the temporal framework of heritage and in the social and political uses of heritage. However, after explored the dynamics of the local within traditionalist heritage conservation, I argue that there is one more shift at play within this changing paradigm: the shift in the spatial dimension in which an emphasis on preserving the local has changed towards an emphasis in implementing genetic resources in a global foodscape. In the figure below, I visualized these shifts.

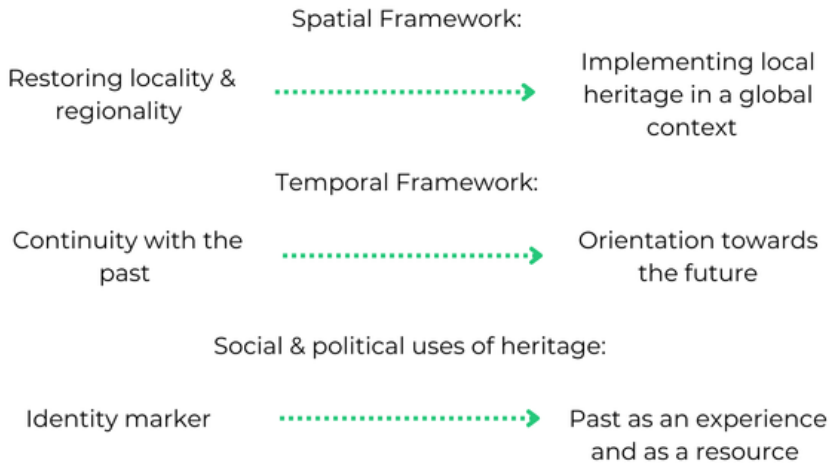


Figure 2 - visualization of the changing spatial, temporal and socio-political dimensions of the paradigm shift within bio-cultural heritage. Retrieved from "Will Heritage Save Us" (Bortolotto, 2024)

The sustainabiliziation of intangible cultural heritage reflects a crucial shift which changes the way in which heritage is represented. Heritage has always been defined against the idea and the anxiety of loss. But, as set forth in the case of bio-cultural heritage, this loss is not only behind us, it is also in front of us, it is yet to come. What is perceived as fundamentally threatened here is not particular cultural practices or traditions but the all-encompassing possibility of human life on planet earth. Therefore, heritage safeguarding is presented as a resource for nutrition, food security, conservation of biological diversity, forest preservation, natural disaster prevention and climate change adaptation (Bortolotto, 2024). Nevertheless, the process of sustainable development entering the heritage realm can be easily adopted by the discourses of intensification, rationalization and industrialization which are prevalent in Dutch agriculture. Within these rationales, heritage is reduced to an exploitable resource to serve the means of sustainable development, which can induce new forms of capital accumulation (Bortolotto, 2024). This entails a risk of a conservative reproduction of the existing, growth-oriented world order, extending capitalism into a green heritage version (Bortolotto, 2024).

Moreover, the classification of agricultural heritage within sustainability frameworks often involves standardization and categorization. Global heritage institutions define criteria that determine which crops qualify as “heritage” within sustainability agendas. However, this process risks universalizing and flattening the intrinsic diversity of heritage crops, molding them into generalizable, market-compatible forms (Bortolotto & Ubertazzi, 2018). This dynamic reflects a broader tension in heritage discourse: while the rhetoric of sustainability celebrates biodiversity, institutional mechanisms may paradoxically homogenize and regulate heritage crops, transforming them into standardized resources rather than maintaining their original ecological and cultural

uniqueness. The integration of heritage into sustainable development projects marks a fundamental shift in how agricultural heritage is conceptualized. Instead of viewing heritage as something to be protected by humans, the emerging paradigm presents heritage as a resource that protects humanity. This shift highlights the strategic value of bio-cultural heritage. However, the sustainability framework is not neutral, it is shaped by political and economic interests that can redefine heritage in ways that serve broader capitalist and industrial agendas. Thus, while heritage safeguarding under sustainability narratives presents new realities for conservation and safeguarding, it also raises important normative questions about who's interests is being served, who is excluded and privileged and to what extent does the sustainability paradigm reinforce rather than challenge existing inequalities within the global food system. Thinking about bio-cultural heritage in terms of sustainable development reflects a fundamental shift in perspective, where it's not about us protecting heritage, it is about heritage protecting us (Bortolotto, 2024). This tension, as set forth by Bortolotto (2024) will serve as a framework to structure the analytical chapters.

Reading heritagization narratives

To examine how bio-cultural heritage is framed and understood through both traditional notions of heritage as the shaping force of sustainable development logic, I draw on the concept of narrative rather than relying solely on discourse. While discourse analysis has been a key tool in the social sciences for understanding how power and knowledge shape socio-political realities (Van Hulst et al., 2024), the focus of this research lies in the processual and performative aspects of meaning-making within heritage. Discourse provides the broader ideological framework in which heritage is conceptualized, shaping what counts as knowledge and how categories such as rootedness, authenticity, and purity are legitimized or contested (Hayes-Conroy & Hayes-Conroy, 2010). However, I employ narrative analysis to gain insight into how individuals and institutions actively construct and negotiate meanings through storytelling, policy documents, and conservation practices.

Narratives serve as chronologically connected accounts that structure experiences, actions, and intentions (Czarniawska, 2004). They offer a situated and process-oriented perspective, allowing us to trace how heritage is framed differently across contexts: as a regional identity marker, a genetic resource for sustainability, or a site of resistance against globalization and industrialization. Narratives, unlike overarching discourses, reveal how people actively make sense of heritage in specific situations, shaping conservation efforts and influencing market practices (McAlpine, 2016). Conversations, media reports, and policy frameworks are all narrative-rich sources that provide a window into the lived experience of heritage, showing how different actors employ the past to negotiate its present and future meaning (Czarniawska, 2004). By focusing on narrative rather than discourse, I examine how stories about heritage crops shape practices, values, and institutions. Narratives do not simply reflect pre-existing discourses; they actively shape them by introducing new ways of understanding heritage, from organizations dedicated to conservation to the commercialization of heritage foods (Wincott, 2018). Different narratives enable and constrain actions, determining who can claim authority over heritage and what is considered valuable within food heritage movements. Heritagization, in this sense, can be read as a performative practice, in which crops and varieties do not inherently possess heritage status but are brought into being *as* heritage (Phillipov & Kirkwood, 2018). This approach allows me to analyze how meaning is

constructed and contested in the everyday negotiation of heritage through the dynamic, situated narratives that actively shape heritage as a social and political category.

The Pronkboon

The *pronkboon* was shown to me by the gardener of the Ommuurde Tuin in Renkum. She once received the bean from a friend, who held a special relationship with it: it helped his family survive during the Dutch *hongerwinter*, the famine at the close of the second world war. During one growing season in her friend's garden, the harvest of the *pronkbonen* failed. Luckily, she could then return the gift, ensuring that he could continue growing them.

Years later, when the CGN asked the gardener of the Ommuurde Tuin if they could exhibit some of their heritage crops, she laughed. One of these was the *pronkboon*, as if they were rarities only found in the freezers of the genebank. "I've been growing them myself already for ages!".

Illustration by Toos Marie Hartog, commissioned for the Ark of Taste NL.

Research Questions, Methodology & Research population

Research questions

The research objective of this thesis is to trace the different narratives at play around the conservation of bio-cultural heritage and, consequently, to attend to the implications of both overlapping and conflicting narratives. Bio-cultural heritage plays a pivotal role in both preserving valuable ecological knowledge and fostering human connections to land, culture, and community. At times of global climate change and the rapid loss of diversity, it is crucial to critically assess what narratives drive and condition conservation efforts. It is important to emphasize that this research is intended to be open and attentive, rather than to delegitimize the heritage food agenda; its aim is to provide a better understanding of the of the politics underlying these efforts and the potential risks that accompany them (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). I aim to offer insightful conclusions on the narratives that can be (unintendedly) reproduced within bio-cultural heritage conservation and how discourses of place and belonging can potentially marginalize others. It is the work of rural sociologists to also deconstruct alternative food movements to contribute to the possibilities for food system change. Throughout this research, the following research questions will serve as guidance:

- What are the implications of different narratives around the conservation of bio-cultural heritage in the Netherlands?
    - What narratives around heritage are present among different heritage practitioners in the Netherlands?
    - How are these narratives experienced, practiced and sensed among different heritage practitioners active in the conservation of bio-cultural heritage?

Positionality & ethics

This thesis is no exception within the social sciences in which my own subjectivity has influenced my experiences and interpretation of the field. My positionality as a Dutch white female researcher from Wageningen University & Research has shaped my experiences in the field, both in an enabling and constraining way.

Firstly, coming from Wageningen University (WUR) has affected my experiences in the field due to the credibility status of the research institute regarding agricultural matters. The WUR has actively shaped agricultural innovations and policies and is an institute that constructs dominant discourse around plant-breeding and crop innovation. Many of my participants therefore welcomed me with delight as I introduced myself as a WUR student, as the institution's status was conferred onto me as an individual. Some participants were even amazed by the fact that the WUR allowed her students to research topics on the alternative food agenda like the conservation of heritage crops, expecting the WUR solely to focus on the innovation of (cash)crops. Although I am writing this thesis with the Rural Sociology Group, the response of participants could have been more reluctant when I would be a sociology student from another university. Therefore, despite the fact that the WUR and its role in intensive agriculture has also been criticized by different practitioners in the field, generally, my positionality as a WUR student has generally had an enabling effect within the field of heritage crops and varieties.

Secondly, because I have been active in the Slow Food Youth Network (SFYN) by participating in their yearly academy before starting this research, I had relatively easy access to the Ark of Taste and its members. Because of my link with Slow Food, I could join a group to Turin in September to the Terra Madre festival which hosted hundreds of Ark of Taste producers across the world. Through my connections at Slow Food, I could easily start my snowball sampling by reaching out to people I already knew. My identity as a SFYN member allowed me to navigate between being a WUR student and someone from Slow Food (or both) when appropriate depending on the context. This gave me the space to strategically deploy these different roles.
Lastly, as a white Dutch person I could move with privilege through the field as people perceived me as Dutch and therefore capable of understanding Dutch heritage. When I started with preparing for my research, I thought the field would be easily accessible because I was Dutch. I thought by staying in my home country, I could in a way move beyond the insider-outsider dichotomy (Anderson, 2021). However, many of my participants were male and retired, situated in rural areas. Often eyebrows were raised when I explained that I lived in Amsterdam, which reinforced dualisms between the urban and rural. Multiple participants felt the need to express their negative opinion on the capital city and the unpredictability of urbanites and their food trends. Also, as it was rare for my participants to encounter a young woman interested in heritage crops, I sometimes felt tested if I was knowledgeable enough in the field of crop breeding for them to consider me as an equal interlocutor. Therefore, the axes shaping my identity have made my experiences in the field at times enabling as well as challenging.

Throughout conducting fieldwork, I was faced with several ethical dilemmas regarding my relationship with my participants. Firstly, I conducted all the interviews in Dutch as were all the informal conversations. As Dutch is my mother tongue, I have the capacity to understand the different layers that come with a language: playing with humor whilst being familiar with references and metaphors. Nevertheless, in translating my data for using citations in the analytical chapters, I most certainly lost particular nuances that come with translating one language to another. This raises a broader ethical concern for me on how to represent your research in a way that is both academically critical and analytical, but still does justice to the practitioners in the field. Since I have felt supported greatly by my participants, I also feel the urge to return to them with helpful insights from my studies. However, my insights from the field predominantly revolve around the critical assessment of how narratives of nostalgia, taste and distinction and sustainable development discourses are reproduced among heritage practitioners in the field. This could be received unexpectedly by participants, who expect a more concrete solution.

Nevertheless, I ensured the ethics of my research practice by always working with either written or oral consent in which I explicitly communicated how I store my data and what I use it for. I stored my data from the field on an encrypted online server which I will delete after completing the thesis process. Furthermore, I chose to refrain from using any names within my analytical chapters to ensure anonymity for all my participants.

Methodology

In this section, all the methods that have helped me in answering the research questions will be listed and briefly explained. This research consists out of qualitative fieldwork that can be characterized as 'multi-sited ethnography' that will take place across the Netherlands. Rather than focusing on a single site, the studying of social phenomena around the conservation of agricultural heritage will take place at multiple sites. The essence of multi-sited research is to follow people, connections, associations and relationships across space (Falzon, 2016).

Recruitment strategy, sampling & stakeholder mapping

Before entering the field, I spent my time researching and mapping out possible stakeholders in the field of bio-cultural heritage conservation. I started off with reaching out to people of the CGN and the Ark of Taste. Through these first conversations, I could develop a preliminary outline of possible relevant stakeholders in the field and their interconnections. Within this early mapping, I outlined three different categories: The Ark of Taste, formal and official institutes (CGN), and connected informal networks.

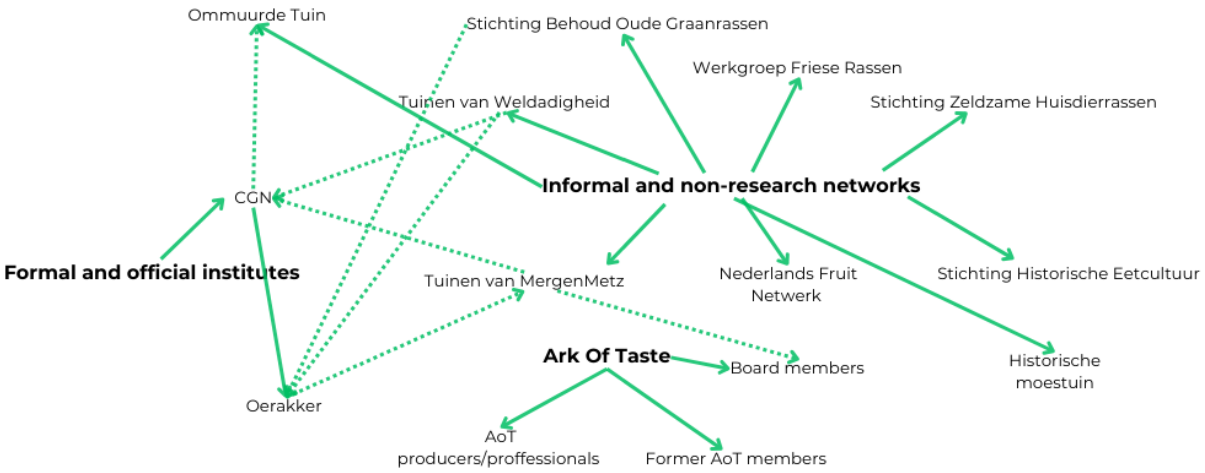


Figure 3 - Stakeholder mapping in the starting off phase of data collection. The solid lines refer to the practitioners connected to specific institutions, whereas the dotted lines reflect the interactions and collaborations between practitioners.

Participants were selected for their activities within either the Ark of Taste and/or the CGN. After a few conversations on the phone with members of the Ark of Taste and the CGN and establishing rapport, snowball sampling was applied to increase the population size. Snowball sampling proves to be an appropriate recruitment strategy when working with a relatively small population in which the members are most likely in contact with each other, which is the case within the communities of bio-cultural heritage practitioners (Leavy, 2017). Furthermore, recruiting participants through snowball sampling increased the building of rapport with other participants since there was already an initial trust as I contacted someone through a recommendation of another practitioner in the field, who acted like a gatekeeper. Also, through snowball sampling, I discovered the connections between different practitioner groups as different names were mentioned more often by others. Furthermore, since most of my participants were retired and conversations took place in a domestic setting, the personal character of snowball sampling increased trust between me and my participants. During the recruiting of new participants, I noticed that more than often I was welcomed with pleasant surprise because I was a young woman was interested in the conservation of heritage crops and

varieties, as most participants associated their practices with elderly people. Consequently, recruitment and sampling became an essential part of the research as it guided me through the visible and invisible networks within the heritage landscape.

Semi structured interviews

Throughout the research, I have used the method of semi-structured and unstructured interviews (n=14). When conducting an unstructured interview, it is clear for both the participants and the researcher that the interview will take place (DeWalt & Musante, 2010). This also involved working with a consent form. Although the interview had an open-ended structure, I have made use of a topic list. With three participants, I conducted a follow-up interview. In the table below I constructed an overview with the participants with whom I conducted a (follow up) interview. In this table I opted to not mention the names of the participants to ensure anonymity.

interviewee	Follow up interview	Date (first interview)	Gender
Employee CGN curator heritage crops	no	31/10	female
Ark of Taste producer / farmer	no	01/11	male
Advocate for heritage pears	no	4/11	male
Ark of Taste producer / farmer	yes	05/11	male
Ark of Taste producer / farmer	no	11/11	female
Board member Ark of Taste	yes	14/11	male
Chair historical garden	no	14/11	male
Former board member of the Oerakker & initiator of a heritage grain conservation project	yes	15/11	male
Agricultural area manager working with heritage crops	no	06/12	male
Former employee CGN curator heritage crops	no	09/12	female
Employee of Foundation for rare husbandry- & pet breeds	no	10/12	female
Former board member of the Oerakker & initiator of a commercial garden with heritage crops	no	11/12	male
Initiator heritage grain project	no	16/12	Male
Initiator of a heritage food forest	no	17/12	male

Participant observation

A cornerstone of qualitative research is the research method of participant observation. Participant observation is explained by DeWalt & Musante (2010) as taking part in daily activities, rituals, interactions and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture. Participant observation is particularly suited to studying the tacit aspects of a research sitation which participants cannot as easily express, e.g. during formal interviews. During the fieldwork period, I attended several organizational meetings in which I could conduct participant observation: A board meeting of the Ark of Taste and a meeting with the department of Cultural Heritage, the Center for Genetic Resources, The Foundation for Rare

Husbandry- & pet breeds and the Ark of Taste. I went to three different symposia, respectively on the themes of agricultural heritage, grains heritage and living heritage. I also helped with the cleaning and processing of heritage grain seeds at the farmhouse of a participant dedicated to the growing and safeguarding of heritage grains. I have volunteered at a hospitality fair with the Ark of Taste. Lastly, as previously mentioned, I joined the Dutch delegation of Slow Food Youth Network to Turino to the biannual Ark of Taste festival 'Terra Madre, Salone Di Gusto'. These events, all in their own ways, have helped me understand the themes at play amongst heritage practitioners and helped in building rapport with participants. Besides organized events, moments 'in between' have proven to be crucial participant observation moments: A walk in someone's garden; in the car with a participant on our way to an event; joining participants for unexpected lunches. All these moments have been crucial in understanding the unfolding of different networks during events, how participants perceive their environment, their interaction with heritage crops, their doubts and their visions.

Unusual focus group – heritage as food for thought

As part of this research, I also co-organized a food-sharing event on heritage crops which functioned as a focus group. In the next chapter, I will go into depth on the content of this event, however in this section I will outline the motivations behind facilitating a focus group as such. A focus group is understood as the hosting and bringing together of a group of people discussing a topic or issue defined by a researcher (Cameron, 2005). Rather than in an interview setting in which there is solely interaction between the researcher and the participant, in a focus group, the interaction between members of the group is the most crucial element. The interactive nature of a focus group in which different people can explore different points of view and reconfigure their own ideas, made this data collection method particularly appropriate for this research as underlying beliefs on heritage conservation could be made explicit and explored collectively. Furthermore, as the field was explicitly described as scattered and dispersed by different participants, facilitating a focus group served as an intervention, bringing practitioners together at a dinner table for a convivial encounter. As this research is concerned with the question how knowledge is constructed and how this has shaped certain discourses, the focus group allowed me to study how multiple meanings are attributed to places, relationships and processes and how these different meanings are negotiated between participants. This intervention was a positive interference in the field, as this focus group was also a means for participants to connect with different practitioners and, in the case of participating farmers and producers, let others taste the foods they produce. Therefore, this focus group *contributed* to the field. Nevertheless, reflecting on the risks explored in the theoretical framework within the practices of bio-cultural conservation, this intervention came with complex questions as an event as such could also contribute to the reinforcement of either exclusionary or reductionist and progress orientated conceptions. In order to position myself as a researcher to these dynamics, I chose to explicitly discuss these risks during the event at the table conversations.

As I am also interested in how participants not only give meaning to heritage crops and varieties but also experience, practice and sense bio-cultural heritage, I turned to creative-arts-based research methods by inviting the senses to the table through (heritage)food sharing. This allowed me to explore how people experience, sense and practice narratives on bio-cultural heritage. Art-based research involves adapting the tenets of creative arts to social research methods in which aesthetic understanding, evocation and provocation are valued (Leavy, 2017). I consider the art of cooking also as part of art-based research methods. I created a setting in which people informally gathered around long tables and in which different heritage foods were served. Also, I

encouraged people to not only talk but also write and draw their associations and ideas on the paper tablecloths. Therefore, as this focus group included sensorial and social elements as well, I refer to this focus group as an *unusual* one.

During the event, data was collected by audio recording devices on each table and by encouraging participants to write and draw their ideas and findings. One of the important characteristics of a focus group is the pivotal role of the researcher who promotes group interaction and focuses on the discussion on the topic or issue (Cameron, 2005). I covered that role by providing a guiding question alongside each course that was being served and a suggestion of how to write, draw, or collect the answers. The questions were based on codes that derived from literature and the interactions with the field. The content of the event including the guiding questions that were being provided will be set forth in greater detail in the next chapter.

The recruitment strategy for the focus group was multifold: Firstly, I reached out to established participants like members of the Ark of Taste, including Slow Food board members and the board of the Slow Food Professionals community, and employees of the CGN. As the CGN and the Ark of Taste were collaborating with the state department of Cultural Heritage and the Foundation for Rare Husbandry and Pet Breeds (SZH), I also invited representatives from these institutions. Furthermore, as I intended to include as many different agricultural heritage practitioners possible to spark the most layered group discussion, we also reached out to producers, farmers, chefs and manufacturers of heritage crops and varieties. I also reached out to academics and artists from my own network who are working with bio-cultural heritage in their practices to offer participants a networking opportunity and to generate fruitful discussions. This sampling strategy can be referred to as *purposeful* sampling as "information-rich cases" are sought out in order to best address the research purpose and questions (Leavy, 2017).

In the preparatory phase, the relationship with farmers and growers became more reciprocal rather than extractive as I purchased their produce whilst conversating about their practices. This created an atmosphere in which I as a researcher was not only interested in their ideas and convictions on heritage crops, but also in the specific crops they were growing themselves. This ensured that they did not solely feel approached as research subjects but also as the producers and growers who they are. An invitation to the event felt like giving something back and extending the conversation. Rather than only extracting data from participants during interviews or a focus group, this method allowed me to make the relationship between researcher and participant more reciprocal. In the table below, I present an inventory of the practitioners who participated in the event.

Background participant event	*Age*	*Gender*
Farmer working with heritage crops	*60 - 70*	*Male*
Farmer working with heritage crops	*30 - 40*	*Male*
Farmer working with heritage crops	*30 - 40*	*Male*
Farmer working with heritage animals	*40 - 50*	*Female*
Farmer working with heritage animals	*50 - 60*	*Male*
Researcher WUR ethnobotany & agricultural heritage	*50 - 60*	*Female*
Researcher center for genetic resources	*20 - 30*	*Female*
Board member Ark of Taste	*60 - 70*	*Male*

Board member Ark of Taste	*50 - 60*	*Female*
Board member Ark of Taste	*60 - 70*	*Male*
Board member Ark of Taste	*50 - 60*	*Female*
Board member Ark of Taste	*50 - 60*	*Female*
Baker working with heritage grains	*50 – 60*	*Male*
Baker working with heritage grains	*20 - 30*	*Male*
Artist working with heritage crops	*30 - 40*	*Female*
Entrepreneur working with heritage beans	*30 - 40*	*Male*
Employee Foundation for Rare Husbandry and Pet Breeds	*30 – 40*	*Female*
Area manager agricultural area working with agricultural heritage	*30 – 40*	*Male*
Area manager agricultural area working with agricultural heritage	*40 - 50*	*Female*
Table Facilitator	*20 - 30*	*Female*
Table Facilitator	*20 – 30*	*Female*
Table Facilitator	*20 - 30*	*Female*
Table Facilitator	*20 – 30*	*Female*
Table Facilitator	*20 - 30*	*Female*
Table Facilitator	*20 – 30*	*Male*
Designer working with agricultural heritage landscapes	*20 -30*	*Female*
Designer working with agricultural heritage landscapes	*20-30*	*Female*
Employee State Department Cultural Heritage	*50-60*	*Male*
Regenerative Chef	*20 -30*	*Female*
Employee of Food Hub – organization working for agricultural change	*20-30*	*Female*
Employee of Food Hub – organization working for agricultural change	*20-30*	*Female*
Student Heritage Studies	*20 - 30*	*Female*
Employee of Greenhouse Horticultural Company	*20 – 30*	*Male*

Coding & Analysis

During the fieldwork, I organized my data systematically to ensure clarity and coherence throughout the analysis. I began with participant observation, where I took "jot notes", brief, keyword-driven entries capturing key moments, expressions, body language, and the atmosphere of the surroundings (Dewalt & Musante, 2010). These jot notes were later expanded into more detailed field notes which served as a foundation for further analysis.

For interviews and events, I used an audio recorder to capture conversations and uploaded the transcribed audio files to an online database for easier access and organization. The analysis process involved coding the data using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis tool. I assigned relevant "codes" to the transcriptions based on categories linked to the research questions (Boeije, 2014). Through this process, I applied both deductive and inductive coding methods: Inductive coding, which entails developing codes from raw data (Chandra & Shang, 2019). This was particularly useful

for topics on which I had limited prior knowledge, such as the market for heritage crops, farmer perceptions, and the embodied experiences of those working with heritage foods. This approach allowed me to approach the data with an open mind and uncover themes that emerged organically from the field. In contrast, deductive coding involved applying pre-established codes derived from the theoretical framework to the data. These codes were informed by the existing literature and the research questions, allowing me to test and explore how the theory manifested in the field. For example, my initial deductive codes focused on concepts like locality, regional pride, and identity, which were central to the theoretical framework. As I engaged with the field, these deductive codes were iterated and supplemented with new insights, leading to the inclusion of additional codes related to the heritage market, small-scale farming realities, and the concept of taste within heritage practices.

To further refine the analysis, I employed Iterative Thematic Inquiry (ITI), a strategy proposed by Morgan & Nica (2020). ITI recognizes that themes evolve over time, allowing for continuous revision and refinement of codes in response to emerging insights from the field. This iterative process enabled me to reassess and refine my overarching themes. As the fieldwork progressed, I recategorized inductive codes and integrated them with literature-based themes, such as sustainable development, knowledge transfer, a sense of loss, and heritage crops as genetic resources. ITI allowed for flexibility in my approach, facilitating responsiveness to unexpected data and generating a richer, more nuanced understanding of the field. By using this method, I navigated the balance between theory-driven exploration and an evolving, data-driven insight into the lived experiences of heritage practitioners. This process, rooted in both deductive and inductive strategies, shaped my research, ensuring it remained responsive and embedded in both theory and field data.

ERF/GOED

An edible exploration of heritage crops, varieties and landscapes

In this chapter I will outline the content of the event that I organized as a part of this research. This event, which became a very rich source for data, functioned as a focus group, but also as a way of establishing myself in the field of bio-cultural heritage conservation. The preparatory phase of this event, in which I reached out to participants, and during which I visited different producers to collect their heritage products, proved to be crucial in building up rapport and conducting participant observation.

For organizing this event, I joined forces with Maya Ouwehand and Lucas. Maya is a social designer working in the realm of sustainable
foodscapes and Lucas is an anthropologist and a chef. Their expertises allowed me to organize an event in which heritage crops and varieties could be served as dishes, inviting the senses and the memory, whilst creating celebratory and informal setting with participants.

The form

The event took place in Pakhuis De Zwijger in Amsterdam, a meeting center that organizes and facilitates events on societal matters and debates. Slow Food was hosting a panel discussion that same night dedicated to the recently published book ”Eating To Extinction” by BBC journalist Dan Saladino, about the “world's rarest foods and why we need to save them” (Saladino, 2021) Because of a strong overlap in themes, we were invited to organize the event at the same night. We decided to call the event “ERF/GOED”, referring to the Dutch word “heritage” but also to the Dutch word ‘erf’, which means farmyard and ‘goed’ which means both good as produce. We organized the space into two long tables consisting of three groups per table. We made a table setting for each group through assigning every seat to a different role: the roles were open for interpretation to allow our participants some flexibility: a farmer or grower, a researcher, a creator, a networker and a producer. The participants could find a seat with a role they identified with. Through this table plan we could make sure tables consisted of different actors t perceptions to be in conversation and secondly, this would make it more likely that people at a table would not know each other. We felt this was important to keep the table conservation focused. We assigned a table facilitator to each table. This person was briefed in advance and was asked to be responsible for the recording and the collection of all perspectives of the table conversation.

The reception

The event started with an informal gathering during which people could read and sign the informed consent. We also started off with a typical Dutch 'borrelplank', a platter with snacks containing heritage pickles from Amsterdam and heritage cheese. Next to the platter there was the opportunity to participate in a "dot voting" in which people could vote on what they associated the 'the borrelplank' with. Participants could vote through sticking a dot with a certain category: from a typical family gathering, to holidays, to birthdays, etc. This dot voting was not necessarily intended to collect specific data, but to introduce and prepare people to the active thinking about bio-cultural heritage that was central to the event.

Dishes and table conversations

We provided all participants with a menu which listed only the heritage ingredients per course and the corresponding theme. Every course had its own central question. During each course we elaborated on the origin and cultural history of each ingredient. Throughout the event, we invited the producers present to tell something plenarily about their practices and their relation to bio-cultural heritage.

The first question was summarized as 'why we conserve'. This question allowed us to explore the narratives that are prevalent amongst the heritage practitioners present at the event. During this course people were asked to discuss why they do what they do and to explore whether this corresponded more with conserving bio-cultural heritage to preserve a regional identity or to safeguard agro-biodiversity. People were invited to discuss and collect different motivations on provided paper. The pieces of paper could be organized in two tin cans that we provided on the table. After a while, we walked around the tables and asked what tin can, that represented either regional identity or biodiversity conservation, they, together as a table, valued as more important. This collective moment of decision sparked discussions among the groups. After we collected the tin

cans from the table, we plenarily reflected on the different perspectives, dilemmas, and questions that had emerged in the groups.

The second course revolved around the way conservation should take shape: within a Dutch tradition or within a globalized context. This question allowed us to explore the tension between the past-orientated narrative and future-focused narrative within heritage conservation and the future focus that is now prevalent within sustainability discourses (Bortolotto, 2024). We encouraged each table to note down their perspectives on the paper tablecloth.

Through this question, we could analyze whether the participants perceived the conservation of agricultural heritage as focused on the practices and traditions around the cultivation of particular crops and varieties, or the specific varieties themselves. We invited participants to discuss this shift in heritage thinking. We served a plate that contained both interpretations of heritage; a Dutch version of a 'stamppot' with heritage potatoes and sauerkraut next to a slice of Indonesian tempeh made from Dutch heritage beans.

The last course revolved around the question: "what does the larger movement of heritage conservation need?". We started off with an intervention by only serving one dessert to one random participant instead of providing the whole group with one. We chose to perform such an intervention to address the rarity of heritage foods and its corresponding exclusivity. After having raised this question, we opted for still providing everybody with a desert. Then we asked each table to draw different connections between the different roles present at each table. What relationships need to be fostered in the conservation of bio-cultural heritage? This question is not directly connected to the theoretical framework, however, it allowed me as a researcher to understand current challenges within the landscape of heritage practitioners and make them explicit. My goal here as a researcher is not to necessarily contribute to the growth of this movement, however, addressing the obstacles that withhold collaboration amongst heritage practitioners help me understand the effect of diverging narratives.

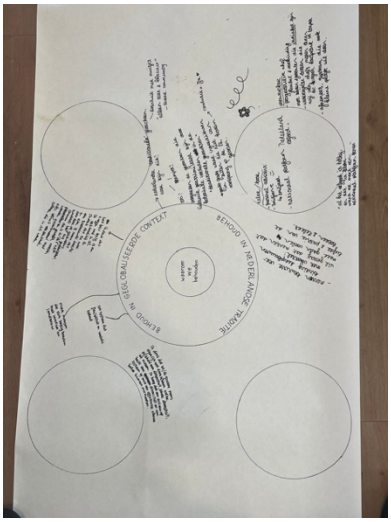
The outro

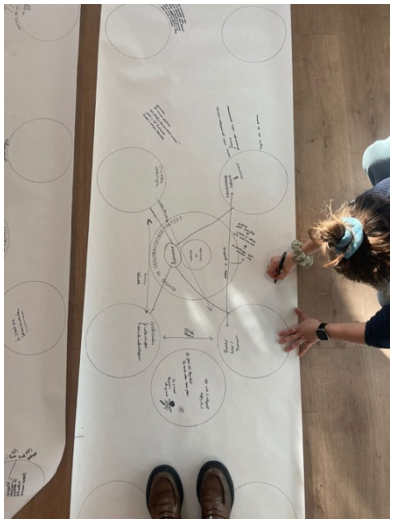
The event ended after two hours. We closed off with providing everybody with a particular heritage bean and the story on how we received it at the Ommuurde Tuin in Renkum. We concluded with the message that heritage exists by the grace of passing on. Here I want to briefly reflect upon the fact that through this act, I produced narrative myself and acted as an intervening participant. Through this gesture, I both referred to a particular understanding of bio-cultural heritage whilst also conveying the constructed nature of heritage. On the one hand, this helped me deconstruct the

image of an objective scientist, on the other hand, this allowed me to experiment with different narratives around heritage and invite my participants to interact with it. Lastly, giving something physical to the attendees was a means to thank them for their participation. We announced that there would be the possibility to participate in a follow-up focus group to continue the conversation.

Evaluation, challenges & opportunities

The event ERF/GOED proved to be a way to build up reciprocal relations with participants,to spark conversations and collect data from participants that would otherwise be harder to collect from an interview. Furthermore, a dinner setting, in which participants spend two hours with their table partners, proved to be an informal and familiar setting that benefited in-depth conversations. ERF/GOED turned out to be more than only a means of gathering data, it was also a means to provide something to my participants and to acquire confidence and credibility in approaching new participants.





Nevertheless, hosting six focus groups simultaneously also meant that I, as a researcher, could not check with all tables to interfere with the discussions. As I was mostly concerned with practicalities around the event, I had to trust on the efficacy of our questions and the capacity of the table facilitators to make valuable conversations emerge and the usefulness of the audio recordings. In possible future possibilities of hosting similar data collection events, I would create more space to reflect plenarily on the questions asked and to collectively explore possible conclusions and implications. It would be insightful to make a live inventory of different perspectives during the event to demonstrate the value of the generated insights.

To analyze the results of ERF/GOED, all table conversations were transcribed and coded, I had a reflection conversation with the table facilitators, we invited all participants to fill in an evaluation, and we analyzed the written material that was generated during the event. ERF/GOED turned out to be a rewarding event as it enabled us as facilitators to translate research questions through food and the senses. Food sharing proves to bring groups together who all have different approaches, ideas, and backgrounds. It allows participants to explore questions whilst inviting different senses to the table: the ingredients for rich, layered, and sensory (data)gathering.

The Wieringerboon

The *wieringerboon*, probably originally from Mexico, found its way in the 17th century to the former island of Wieringen, to the north of Amsterdam. The story goes that since the ship of the former West India Company that carried the beans could not pass through the waterway, it had to discharge the cargo at the island, and that's how the bean got its name. The colorful bean gained in popularity as it fed the many workers at sea. Centuries later, as growers lost interest and the landscape changed, the bean fell into oblivion and was almost nowhere to be found on any Dutch soils. Until, on a certain day after the second world war, the wieringerboon popped up as the *wirringer* at a seed list of Dutch migrant communities in the United States. Ever since, the *wieringerboon* is grown and distributed again in the Netherlands.

This story was shared with me at one of my field visits to the Tuinen van Weldadigheid, an extraordinary garden in Veenhuizen, Groningen. The garden accommodates the largest edible plant collection of the Netherlands. Illustration by Toos Marie Hartog, commissioned for the Ark of Taste NL.

Chapter one

Us Saving Heritage

> "We need to cherish our historical roots by giving our cultural landscape back to our primal farmers"
>
> (ERF/GOED, 26/011, Amsterdam, Author's translation from Dutch)

In this chapter, I will combine results from the field with theoretical analysis to answer the question on what narratives are at play within the field and how these are practiced and experienced. This chapter explores the understandings amongst heritage practitioners with an emphasis on the past in which a -pre-industrial landscape is envisioned. Consequently, I will use the concept of Habitus by Bourdieu (1984) to expose the different layers at play within these narratives among different groups. Within this chapter I seek to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of how heritage conceptualized, experienced, practiced and sensed amongst my interlocutors.

Going back and the invention of tradition

During an interview with a board member of the Ark of Taste, I asked about where to find *Brabants zandboekweit*, a heritage buckwheat from the southern Netherlands. I wanted to use it as an ingredient during the ERF/GOED event, and he suggested to contact a Dutch initiative dedicated to conserving heritage grains, which had recently harvested a large quantity, he recalled. In the process of sourcing the buckwheat and reaching out to the initiative, I also received an invitation to a symposium organized by this initiative. Titled *"Back to Our Future,"* the event was framed around the restoration of a pre-industrial agricultural landscape, envisioning the cultivation of Dutch heritage wheat varieties such as einkorn, emmer, and rye for local bakeries.

The symposium was held in a conference center in the forests of Utrecht, a venue that promotes itself as the "greenest conference and meeting center in the Netherlands," emphasizing its use of organic and biodynamic products (Antropia, n.d.). Outside the entrance, fresh bread and pastries were being sold, and the atmosphere was lively, with predominantly middle-aged, white attendees engaging in conversation. Alongside the baked goods, numerous flyers and booklets were displayed, detailing projects related to heritage grains or other initiatives. Some of these materials included copies of *De Andere Krant* (*The Other Newspaper*), a self-proclaimed independent journalism platform that has been associated with spreading conspiracy theories around COVID (Geelhoed et al., 2022). Another stall, run by a publisher focused on "alternative perspectives on society," featured books on astrology, spirituality, Celtic heritage, and tarot.

Throughout the event, speakers repeatedly emphasized the need to "go back" to the real Dutch arable flora landscape; an agricultural environment defined by native herbaceous plant species that, they argued, has been threatened by industrial farming (Bakels, 2022). The initiative's founder, in his opening speech, explicitly positioned the project against contemporary nature conservation organizations such as *Natuurmonumenten* and *Staatsbosbeheer* (a private and a governmental body responsible for nature conservation in the Netherlands). He criticized these institutions for what he called "reservoir thinking" and "false romanticism", accusing them of prioritizing ecological conservation over the farmer's role in shaping the cultural landscape

(Interview 13, Arnhem, 16/12, authors translation from Dutch). In a follow-up interview, the founder elaborated on his vision of “reversed innovation,” a perspective that seeks to bring the past into the present by reviving historical agricultural landscapes. He invoked the Dutch expression “Ot & Sien tijd,” which refers to an idealized, pre-industrial rural past; a lost paradise of small-scale farming (Dagevos, 2004; Interview 13, Arnhem, 16/12, authors translation from Dutch).). As part of this vision, he advocated for the restoration of traditional shepherding practices on the Dutch heathlands, arguing that these practices represented an authentic and primal form of agriculture that could reconcile nature conservation with farming. His references stretched deep into history, referring to the prehistoric Bell Beaker culture as a marker of “where we come from” (Interview 13, Arnhem, 16/12, authors translation from Dutch). Within this framing, agricultural heritage was not merely about maintaining biodiversity or local food traditions; it was an ecological, economic, and identity-based project rooted in the restoration of a supposedly pure, pre-industrial cultural landscape.

This symposium and interview illustrate a traditionalist approach to agricultural heritage: that is centered on historical rootedness, continuity with the past, and resistance to modernity. The revival of heritage grains is not framed solely as an agricultural practice but as part of a broader political and cultural project that contests globalization and industrialized food production. Within this initiative, temporality is constructed in complex ways: prehistoric landscapes merge with medieval farming practices, shaping an imagined past in which primal systems are perceived as stable and superior (Littaye, 2015). The emphasis on tradition, old varieties, and landscapes of the past constructs a heritage narrative that resists the technocratic innovation and change associated with modernity. In this logic, heritage crops become not just agricultural products but symbols of anti-establishment resistance.

The perception of heritage grains as inherently natural and pure was also evident in conversations at the ERF/GOED event, where participants reflected on the role of bio-cultural heritage in preserving a pre-industrial food landscape. During a roundtable discussion between members of the foundation for rare husbandry and pet breeds and food designers, one participant remarked: "A hundred or two hundred years ago, people lived in coexistence with the seasons. Now, I’m afraid my children won’t even find it odd to see strawberries in December." (ERF/GOED, Amsterdam, 26/11, authors translation from Dutch). This comment, to which table companions responded to with nods of agreement, reflects a belief in an essential, lost natural order, one that heritage foods can help restore. Another participant added: "It is a natural human need to feel rooted, to understand where you come from. At a time of total globalization, heritage is essential for connecting to a place." (ERF/GOED, Amsterdam, 26/11, authors translation from Dutch). This perspective suggests that heritage is not just an identity marker but a deeper reflection of natural belonging. The idea that consuming foods from one’s native region is better for microbiome and your health further reinforces the notion that heritage foods are biologically and ecologically superior to modern, industrial alternatives. The facilitator summarized the conversation with the statement: "Communities that sustain a tradition, closely tied to regional identity, are also the reason it continues to exist." (ERF/GOED, Amsterdam, 26/11, authors translation from Dutch). This statement encapsulates a key traditionalist perspective: heritage persists because communities actively reproduce it, resisting the disruptions of modernization. The emphasis is not necessarily nostalgic but highlights the necessity of continuity and the preservation of a proven persistence (Bessière, 2013).

The question of when something becomes tradition was also discussed at the event. A representative of the Ark of Taste was asked how the organization determines whether a food product qualifies as heritage. She responded: "This has been tricky at times. That's why we decided that, for the Ark of Taste, something is a tradition if it has been cultivated and used for at least forty years." (ERF/GOED, Amsterdam, 26/11, authors translation from Dutch). This reflects how the temporality of heritage is on the one hand very crucial in heritage crops varieties but, on the other hand, also demonstrates how arbitrary this process is and how different heritage practitioners adhere to different temporalities in shaping heritage; from prehistoric references to pre-industrial indications. Different actors within the field of bio-cultural heritage employ different temporal frameworks: from prehistoric references to pre-industrial landscapes, all legitimizing certain conservation practices. This was further emphasized by an employee of the State Department for Cultural Heritage, who articulated a broad definition of heritage as: "All things, but also stories and habits, and how you relate to those, everything you want to pass on to your children and what continues from generation to generation." (ERF/GOED, Amsterdam, 26/11, authors translation from Dutch). His statement underscores how heritage is not only about material conservation but about maintaining continuity through shared cultural narratives. However, this continuity is often justified through appeals to naturalness, reinforcing the idea that certain landscapes, foodways, and practices ought to persist because they align with an idealized, pure past.

These reflections on the field reveal that within traditionalist heritage projects, naturalness and pureness serve as powerful legitimizing concepts. Heritage crops and landscapes are framed as authentic, biologically superior, and culturally essential, forming a counter-narrative to industrialized agriculture and globalized food systems. By positioning the past as a site of resistance, these narratives construct heritage as something not only to be protected but actively restored. Yet, as the shifting temporal frameworks and contested definitions demonstrate, heritage is not a static relic but a continuously negotiated and strategically employed concept.

Gastronomic rarities

Beyond the strong emphasis on the past and regional identity, the taste of the past emerged as a crucial dimension in heritage conservation during the ERF/GOED event and interviews. Through sensory engagement with food, participants actively constructed the meaning of taste within heritage discourse. The association between taste and the past was made explicit in an anecdote shared by an Ark of Taste member working with heritage goose breeds:

"During Christmas, I prepared something conventional for the kids, but I also prepared lamb and goose; all were my own animals. At one point we lost grandmother, and then we found her in the kitchen finishing the goose carcass. She said: 'This tastes like the old days! Don't you know how tasty that is?'" (ERF/GOED, Amsterdam, 26/11, authors translation from Dutch).

His table companions responded in agreement, reinforcing the notion that heritage foods possess a distinct and superior taste, one that industrialized foods lack. Another Ark of Taste member elaborated those geese meat has "a very beautiful and strong taste," distinct from the milder, standardized flavors of mass-produced meat (ERF/GOED, Amsterdam, 26/11, authors translation from Dutch). However, he emphasized that preparing heritage foods requires skill: "You have to know how to prepare the product in combination with other tastes, to add balance, but it is something you

have to know." These reflections position heritage foods as an exclusive category, one that demands knowledge and experience to fully appreciate. The association between taste and authenticity was further reinforced by a representative of the state department of cultural heritage, who recalled the superior flavor of the potatoes grown by his late uncle, a 'keuterboer', a small-scale subsistence farmer from the pre-industrial Dutch agricultural landscape. "The taste of his potatoes was a lot better than the potatoes we have now because it was a combination of the variety and the quality of the soil." (ERF/GOED, Amsterdam, 26/11, authors translation from Dutch). Similarly, the founder of the heritage grain initiative contrasted the taste of industrial bread with that of traditionally baked heritage-grain bread: "People say you cannot bake bread with Dutch grains. Then I say no, not that stupid 'busbread' (the name for the typically industrially produced supermarket bread). That requires so many additives just to stand upright. Well, congratulations! In my bread, there are fewer glutes but more taste." (ERF/GOED, Amsterdam, 26/11, authors translation from Dutch). A recurring theme in these discussions was the rejection of industrialized flavors in favor of the more complex, and often bitter, tastes of heritage foods. One middle-aged farmer connected to the Ark of Taste explained: "For example, Brussels sprouts, they used to be bitter! They did a nice job in Wageningen; they manipulated the bitterness away, and a sweet taste remained! The kids like it. The same for chicory. I really used to like it. Yes, I love bitterness. It is a complex taste that you must learn to eat." (Interview 3, Halfweg-Zwaneburg, 5/11, authors translation from Dutch). This perspective reflects a broader narrative within heritage food discourse: industrialization has not only altered agricultural practices but has also reshaped tastes, eroding the appreciation for certain flavors. The preference for bitterness, then, is framed as an acquired taste, one that signals a deeper cultural knowledge and engagement with heritage foods.

The Ark of Taste's emphasis on taste extends beyond personal preference; it is embedded in their communication strategies and how they convey their vision. For example, in a board meeting where members debated the nomination of a heritage cherry variety for inclusion in the Ark of Taste. Initially skeptical, one board member joked that the cherry "has to be tasty," highlighting the centrality of taste in determining what qualifies as heritage (participant observation, online, 19/11, authors translation from Dutch). The important role of taste was also particularly evident at a hospitality fair in Amsterdam, where the Ark of Taste, a notably small organization compared to the dominant food corporations present, positioned themselves at the event. In the days before the event, one participant who is part of the Ark of Taste texted me: "We want to make a statement to the rest of the 'big boys.'" (private communication, online, 14/01). The Ark of Taste stall hosted various producers working with heritage crops and breeds, accompanied by promotional materials that reinforced the connection between heritage and taste. A tempeh producer was described as making "tasteful tempeh, the entrecôte of the kingdom of plants," while a farmer working with heritage grains was praised for refusing hybrids to "guarantee a good taste." Other descriptions emphasized tradition and authenticity: a salt works initiative functioned "just like the old days," a cheesemaker produced "traditional cheese with a characteristic taste; full, sweet, and nutty," and a cider maker working with heritage orchards maintained "paradises of biodiversity". The Ark of Taste states that these products are all quality products that risk extinction and that therefore it is important to "keep buying these products" (internal communication Ark van de Smaak, authors translation from Dutch). This emphasis on taste within the conservation of bio-cultural heritage aligns with the broader ideology of Slow Food, which advocates for the notion of "voting with your fork." Within this logic, consuming heritage foods becomes an act of resistance against industrialized agriculture and globalized food

systems. As highlighted in the theoretical framework, Cavanaugh (2023) describes heritage foods as a product of capitalism by responding to the limits of what global capitalism can provide whist being shaped by the possibilities for profit that capitalism can afford. This is visible in the communication of the Ark of Taste: the products are described as a counterculture to capitalist mass-produced taste-less products, nevertheless, their preservation ultimately depends on market-based solutions. Here we see that nostalgic narratives are employed and consequently commodified.

Bourdieu's concept of taste as a form of social distinction helps contextualize the ways in which heritage foods function as identity markers. Within the Ark of Taste, cultural knowledge about what makes food "heritage" is not just a matter of historical significance but also a means of differentiation from mass-produced foods and mainstream consumers. The ability to appreciate the complexity of heritage flavors, such as bitterness, demonstrates a cultivated and acquired taste, reinforcing a certain habitus among participants. This distinction was frequently emphasized during interviews and events. Heritage foods were celebrated for their complexity, while conventional products were dismissed as inferior. At the hospitality fair, for instance, Ark of Taste members expressed disdain for the industrialized food stalls surrounding them. One member scoffed at a pre-sliced onion seller who "didn't even know what onion variety he was selling." This citation summarizes how heritage food advocates position themselves as knowledgeable insiders, in contrast to an uninformed mass consumer group.

Conclusion - justifying heritage practices

This chapter has attempted to outline how the narratives around agricultural bio-cultural heritage in the Netherlands operates on multiple levels: it serves as a means of envisioning historical continuity, a form of resistance against industrial food systems, and a marker of social distinction. The valorization of taste plays a central role in these processes, not only in defining what is considered heritage but also in shaping consumer behavior and producer practices. Farmers, chefs, and catering wholesalers working with heritage crops and breeds have increasingly tailored their practices to high-status heritage tastes, often catering to high-end restaurants and specialty bakers. This dynamic was evident at the hospitality fair, where Ark of Taste members actively distanced themselves from mainstream food industry representatives.

Nevertheless, although past oriented narratives in which change is resisted have proven to be prevalent in the field, the world of agricultural heritage conservation has proven to be dynamic and versatile and cannot be solely defined by a singular narrative. Apart from the table conversation that explicitly discussed rootedness, regionality and the politics of place were less at play in justifying bio-cultural heritage practices than explored in the theoretical framework. Several participants referenced other European contexts where heritage conservation was more institutionalized through protected designation of origin (PDO) labels and regional pride. In an interview, an Ark of Taste board member recalled a conversation with a Belgian colleague who remarked: "You Dutch guys are only interested in what is new, in progress, in breeding techniques, but not in what lies behind you. A lack of historical awareness." (Interview 4, Dorwerth, 7/11, authors translation from Dutch). This observation underscores the tension between heritage conservation as a countercultural movement and the challenge of embedding it within a broader socio-economic framework. While heritage food advocates position themselves against industrialized food systems, their emphasis on exclusivity

and high-status tastes raises questions about accessibility and the potential for broader cultural adoption. In sum, the narratives on taste within heritage conservation reveal a complex interplay between historical nostalgia, social differentiation, and political resistance. The Ark of Taste's efforts illustrate how taste is not just a sensory experience but a tool for accessing nostalgic narratives and constructing identity, challenging dominant food systems, and legitimizing particular food practices as worthy of preservation.

Brabantish *zandboekweit*

Buckwheat, a pseudo-grain, originated in China, but found its way to the Netherlands during the middle-ages. Buckwheat used to be the dominant staple crop in the Netherlands, until the rise of potatoes and synthetic fertilizer. This particular variety was grown on the nutrient-poor soils of the southern province of Brabant. It is used in the dish “balkenbrij”, which is made from pork leftovers, broth, buckwheat flower and sweet spices. The groats were used to make porridge and beer, whereas the chaff was used as pillow filling. Buckwheat is depicted on many weapons of cities and villages.

We shared this story during the ERF/GOED event to provide context for our participants about the buckwheat that they were served. Illustration by Toos Marie Hartog, commissioned for the Ark of Taste NL.

Chapter two

Heritage Saving Us

> "I would be far more concerned if the lemon bean were to disappear from the Netherlands, and from the world, than losing a specific cultural method of drying. For me, it's all about biodiversity; if we lose it, everything will collapse"
>
> - (ERF/GOED, 26/011, Amsterdam, Author's translation from Dutch)

In this chapter, I will explore the qualitative findings from the field to understand the narratives in the field that emphasize the future and conceptualize bio-cultural heritage as a resource. As outlined in the previous chapter, there is a prevalent discourse among heritage practitioners that emphasizes the past whilst resisting change when advocating for the conservation of agricultural heritage. Nevertheless, this discourse is not all-encompassing as already pointed out in the introduction. The work of a social scientist becomes particularly valuable to understand the nuances, the dynamics and the shifts within dominant heritage discourse. In this chapter, I will shift my focus to the narratives among bio-cultural heritage practitioners in which the conservation of heritage crops revolves around a loss that is yet to come, rather than a loss that is behind us.

Heritage as future-smart

During the ERF/GOED event, participants were asked to reflect on understanding bio-cultural heritage as specific crops and varieties or the knowledge and traditions around it. This question was asked to evoke a discussion in which specific elements of different narratives could be made explicit. During one table conversation, a participant who is an entrepreneur connected to the Ark of Taste and who produced the tempeh served, shared his perspective. One of his bean suppliers was working with a traditional drying method called *ruiteren* through making bean pyramids on the field which he described as "a not really efficient system". "Nobody does that anymore" he continues, "only one or two producers in the Netherlands. It is not only inefficient, itis also risky because when it rains, your beans are wet and then you need to consume your beans within a week" (ERF/GOED, 26/011, Amsterdam, Author's translation from Dutch). He describes this technique as "pretty" since so many Dutch landscape paintings depict these pyramids, but that for him and his practice "it is so much more about the specific varieties of beans." "There is a scientific consensus that the only bigger risk for the world than climate change is the loss of biodiversity, because otherwise everything will collapse. The more biodiversity, the bigger the resilience" (ERF/GOED, 26/011, Amsterdam, Author's translation from Dutch). This notion of 'collapse' reflects the emphasis on the loss that is ahead of us instead of behind (Bortolotto, 2024). The stress on scientific consensus also suggests a certain neutrality which distances itself from notions of 'traditional' or 'authentic' that carry a sense of nostalgia. Within this statement, he acknowledges the landscape is changing and that traditional methods are disappearing – through this, he rejects the necessity of reproducing long-standing practices by resisting change within heritage conservation as he assesses this particular drying method as inefficient. Rather, he fosters change by rejecting particular methods but encouraging the use of specific crops.

At another table, a farmer working with heritage goats from which she makes raw milk and farmer's cheese (cheese only made with milk produced on the farm rather than delivering milk in bulk to a cheese manufacturer), reflected on the question asked together with her table company. A

driving force behind her work, she said, was the “fear” that modern agriculture is “creating a too sterile environment, with too much processed food, so that our bodies can no longer process anything 'bad'". She labeled this as a “threat”, that, “without us realizing, micro-organisms will make us severely sick. It will look like our beautiful products did that (referring to heritage cheeses), but in fact it is the other way around.” (ERF/GOED, 26/011, Amsterdam, Author’s translation from Dutch). This observation on the developments within the cheese industry and the decline of cheese diversity and its micro-organisms reflects a fear for a loss that is in front of us (Bortolotto, 2024). Therefore, her cheese practice is not so much a project of conserving a heritage cheese, making tradition as a remnant of the past, but rather as a future-oriented practice in which cheeses made of heritage goat-milk serve as a resource to sustain a livability for the future.

A similar position was reflected in an interview with a former member of the *Oerakker*, who was recommended by various participants to reach out to since his farming practices, in which he works with hundreds of varieties of heritage grains, were celebrated among many in the field. What is also remarkable about his way of farming is that he works with horses as traction animals and that he works the land manually with a plough and a scythe. On his fields, he grows more than 530 heritage grain varieties in collaboration with Wageningen University and Research and the university of Brussels. I was received with great hospitality as I was picked up from the station. When we sat down in his kitchen, he served me his home-made *vlaai,* a type of pie that is characteristic for the province of Limburg. He is financially supported by a Dutch insurance- and investment company. “Ancient seeds to help climate-smart farming” is the title of an online publication by the company on his farming-practices. "It presents a nostalgic image, but that is misleading. His experiments can provide interesting information for modern agriculture” (a.s.r. real estate, 2024). This article exemplifies the narrative around agricultural heritage in which there is an emphasis on the future, modern innovation and in which change is promoted. The farmer wondered “why ‘we’ (referring to the academic community and R&D of seed breeding companies) don’t develop disease-resistant crops with a huge amount of knowledge and money. Old crops, new crops, I don’t care. We have to make sure that we have disease-resistant varieties.” (Interview 6, 15/11, Afferden, Author’s translation from Dutch). During the interview, in which he describes his practice, he emphasizes his focus is on the safeguarding and multiplication of seed. “I love science”, he states, when he complains about the people who message him on his Facebook page in response to his updates on the preservation of old grain varieties who are talking about feeling “energetic energy” (Interview 6, 15/11, Afferden, Author’s translation from Dutch). He did not elaborate on the content of these messages, but it suggests that he does not want to be associated with any pseudo-science regarding his conservation practices. “You can have experiences that you cannot explain, but that is not because of something mysterious, that is because of a lack of knowledge.” (Interview 6, 15/11, Afferden, Author’s translation from Dutch). He adds a bit later that people have a misplaced glorification and a distorted idea of the primordial man. “Fine” he says, “I would say, you can go back to the pure former life, but then you do it right, or you don't. If you want to spend your life with only a little bearskin on, be my guest. But be consistent.” (Interview 6, 15/11, Afferden, Author’s translation from Dutch). By these statements, he positions himself as anti-nostalgic and anti-past oriented in which the conservation of heritage is an identity marker, because of a shared past, rather, he employs heritage grains as an instrument for innovation, food-security and sustainable development.

When I join him and his partner for lunch on another day, I am somehow surprised that conventional supermarket meat and cheese are being served and that his bread is factory bread too. I expected something made of unconventional grains and other local products. His own grains that

he grows are not sold or manufactured anywhere; they are solely used for research purposes. During lunch he asks me how much a sourdough bread costs in Amsterdam, to which I respond that it is normal to pay 7 to 10 euros. He proclaims that he thinks that's criminal. "Currently, whenever something is a bit special, then one puts a price tag on that and then it remains for a very small club. That hinders old crops to be reintroduced in the food system, because it is made too exclusive." (Interview 6, 15/11, Afferden, Author's translation from Dutch). The supermarket lunch can therefore be read as a silent statement against organic or local products that have become, in his perspective, exclusive and only within reach for an elitist group.

When I drive back from his farm together with a retired friend of his who has always worked at the CGN, after having helped him cleaning and sorting his seeds with an analogue traditional machine, she shares with me that she is worried how he is going to transfer all his acquired knowledge. Not only the knowledge of the crops, but also of all the traditional techniques he uses. When I had earlier asked him that day on why he chooses to work like this, with his horses, scynthe and wooden machines, he explains that for him it is just a hobby and a means to exercise. This can be read from a perspective in which he deliberately marginalizes his practices as private hobbies to not delegitimize his scientific, future-orientated approach focused on safeguarding rather than conserving. In no possible scenario, he described his style of farming as a means to reproduce long standing practices. At most, his practices in which he uses no heavy machinery nor synthetic fertilizer are an instrument to regain biodiversity within his fields. The attention is therefore not so much focused on cultural elements, but rather on the possibility of sustainability and food security in which the future has shaped the time dimension of heritage safeguarding. In his critique, he indirectly disapproves the gastronomic aesthetic that has emerged within the Ark of Taste in the conservation of Dutch agricultural heritage.

However, during different Ark of Taste meetings and at interviews with its board members, it became clear that the Ark of Taste is not a one-dimensional initiative in which agricultural heritage crops and varieties are solely understood as a gastronomic rarity in need to be conserved because of nostalgic sentiments. Also, within the Ark of Taste there is constant internal conversation, above and below the surface, on the course they want to take. During an interview, a former Slow Food & Ark of Taste member, who has left Slow Food and is now part of an activist organization, highlighted that, for him, Slow Food was overly emphasizing 'taste' in their mission. Although he endorsed their route, he was seeking a less gastronomy focused but more political activist way of questioning conventional food systems and corresponding biodiversity loss. For him, the past "reflects what we need. However, the past is predominantly a starting point, not an end in itself" (interview 13, online, 17/12, authors translation from Dutch). He described heritage crops and varieties as "instruments that can play an important role in the conservation of biodiversity". This reflects a future oriented temporality. Although this vision is expressed by someone who has left the Ark of Taste out of dissatisfaction, a similar rhetoric was also shared during my fieldwork by its current members. One board member described the Ark of Taste as "nothing more than just a very pretty flyer" (Interview 4, Dorwerth, 7/11, authors translation from Dutch). This member also complains about people who project a spiritual ancestorial property to heritage crops and varieties: "I'm not into Keltic stuff, or sun and rain dancing. I think a seed sprouts because it must" (Interview 4, Dorwerth, 7/11, authors translation from Dutch). During another meeting with the department for cultural heritage, the foundation of rare husbandry animals and the CGN, one member of the Ark of Taste acknowledged that "heritage can be nostalgic." (participant observation, Amersfoort, 22/11, authors translation from Dutch). She

continued that “the movement needs old knowledge for a *new* agriculture. The Ark of Taste should not become a cabinet of curiosities.” (participant observation, Amersfoort, 22/11, authors translation from Dutch). This meeting ended with the conclusion that any future projects should be “future-oriented” and focused on "renewal”. Somebody added that if they were to organize an event or set up a new project, “overly conservative people should not be invited” (participant observation, Amersfoort, 22/11, authors translation from Dutch).

These statements reflect that the Ark of Taste is not a monolithic movement and that within the same organization, the shift is also very much at play in which heritage is increasingly understood from a sustainable development perspective rather than a remnant of the past that needs to be conserved. Within the narratives listed above, the notion of taste or tradition is rarely mentioned. Safeguarding in this context is concerned with specifically using heritage as a genetic resource that fits a frame of innovation and sustainable development. While heritage crops hold undeniable ecological value in an era of bio-cultural extinction, their increasing alignment with sustainable development goals risks reducing them to mere instruments of ‘green growth’. This shift reflects a broader tension whether heritage should be preserved for its intrinsic cultural and ecological significance, or whether it must be repurposed to fit capitalist and progress-driven frameworks.

Conclusion - cultivating heritage

When I asked a retired employee about the reason why the CGN exists, she answered plainly that the CGN is there to make diversity available for whoever is interested; it being researchers, seed-breeding companies or interested individuals. When I asked her if she considered the CGN as a political project, she responded with a headshaking ‘no’. She proclaimed that she associated politics with “parliament, elections and the cabinet and such” (informal conversation, 09/12, authors translation from Dutch). The CGN was there to safeguard diversity and to facilitate genetic information for new opportunities, presenting this as a neutral endeavor. Nevertheless, heritage safeguarding proves to be deeply political embedded in different narratives.

Among the farmers I interviewed who work with heritage crops and varieties, economic concerns stood central. While these farmers differentiate themselves in the market by cultivating heritage crops, the paradox is that heritage itself becomes a universalized category within an economic logic. One example is an agricultural area manager involved in a project south of Rotterdam, where farmers, municipalities, and recreation organizations collaborate to restore "pre-Second World War biodiversity" through the reintroduction of local crops such as false flax for linen and oil production and common wheat for craft beer and sourdough bread. Throughout our conversation, he repeatedly emphasized the need for these crops to be “profitable,” of “high value,” and that “the farmer should be able to earn his daily bread.” (interview 3, Rhoon, 06/11, authors translation from Dutch) At the ERF/GOED event, he further stressed that their project prioritized “pursuing biodiversity rather than conserving social heritage.” (ERF/GOED, Amsterdam, 26/11, authors translation from Dutch) This reflects a broader sustainable development narrative in which heritage crops are valued for their functional biodiversity rather than as cultural artifacts in and of themselves. This approach also aligns with a form of economic pragmatism: conservation is only feasible if it is financially viable. Other farmers and gardeners working with heritage varieties echoed this sentiment, highlighting the necessity of profitability within sustainability initiatives. This aligns with the broader win-win logic often associated with sustainable development, where ecological projects are simultaneously framed as vehicles for green growth (Bortolotto, 2024).

Within this logic, agricultural heritage becomes a market-driven commodity, detached from the specific cultural and historical contexts in which these crops and varieties originally emerged. Instead, bio-cultural heritage is reframed as a universalized opportunity for the future. This transformation positions heritage as both a resource for new forms of capital accumulation and a site of resistance against industrialized agriculture (Bortolotto, 2024). One of my interlocutors, a horticultural farmer from a polder near Amsterdam who grows Ark of Taste heritage crops, articulated this duality. He explained that his survival in the industry was not due to modernization but rather to his refusal to embrace "mechanization, intensification, and scaling up." (Interview 3, Halfweg-Zwaneburg, 5/11, authors translation from Dutch). Another farmer, specializing in heritage poultry, expressed a similar perspective: by resisting modernization, they had managed to persist. Yet, paradoxically, because they did so, their products are now valued not only for their gastronomic uniqueness but also as essential components of sustainable development.

This reveals an important overlap and tension: heritage conservation is mobilized both within past-oriented narratives that resist change and future-oriented narratives that embrace it. In both cases, heritage serves as a tool for development, whether for revitalizing rural areas or advancing sustainable food security and biodiversity. These chapters have demonstrated that both perspectives can be co-opted within growth-oriented logics. This raises a key question: who can afford which narratives? Farmers and growers are bound by capitalist structures that dictate their economic survival. As a result, they must strategically navigate these narratives to ensure their livelihood. Most farmers and growers do not depend solely on Dutch heritage crops but also rely on the cultivation of different international crops. This shows that within the lived realities of farmers, they cannot fully embody purist or totalizing narratives of resistance and/or safeguarding. Rather, they must instrumentalize these narratives to secure their place in an evolving agricultural landscape.

Discussion

Heritage within heritage

> "Isn't Dutch heritage also the drive to earn as much as possible with as little space possible? I mean, *mass is cash* within agriculture, there is almost nothing more Dutch, right? Isn't that heritage?"
>
> - (ERF/GOED, 26/011, Amsterdam, Author's translation from Dutch)

As the previous chapters have illustrated, heritage can be read as a performative and discursive practice, which brings crops and varieties into being *as* heritage in different ways (Phillipov & Kirkwood, 2018). The guiding questions throughout the two chapters has been how bio-cultural heritage is shaped, practiced, sensed and experienced by thinking both in terms of a political project of "going back" as well as a project of sustainable development. In this discussion I will come back to the research question of this thesis, and I will set forth what the implications are for the future of bio-cultural heritage-conservation in the Netherlands by engaging with literature and the field.

Revisiting the literature

The two chapters can possibly be read as a dichotomy, as two categories at the end of a spectrum in which one can subdivide the underlying motivations of heritage practitioners. This, however, would be an unsatisfactory and reductionistic conclusion. Firstly, the two chapters highlight and showcase that within either emphasizing the past or the future, there are diverse motivations of heritage conservation and safeguarding that highlight the gradient within overlapping motives; As a counter-hegemonic project envisioning pureness, as a means for social distinction, as a project of future-oriented progress and climate-smart farming and a means of differentiating within a competitive market. This shows that the process of heritage making is evolving and emergent, and prone to appropriation by different actors in the field. Returning to the theoretical framework, the spatial dimension and the notion of locality within heritage crops was explored in the literature in great detail in comparison to my experiences in the field. The work of Porciani (2019), Goodman & Dupuis (2005) and Purcel and Brown (2005) highlighted the complexity and the reification of the concept of the local which were constructive in understanding heritage crops theoretically. Therefore, I opted to add a spatial dimension to the framework provided by Bortolotto (2024) in which she describes a twofold shift in heritage narratives: a temporal and a sociopolitical shift. Within the traditionalist conception of bio-cultural heritage, locality and regionality are restored by conserving heritage. Following Bortolotto's framework in which heritage crops are increasingly understood instrumentally and as a resource to foster change, bio-cultural heritage safeguarding is intended to answer *global* challenges and is therefore disposed of locality. Nevertheless, within the field, the concept of the local as a justification for bio-cultural heritage conservation to restore a place-based identity, was neither dominant within past-orientated nor future-focused narratives. Although this doesn't mean that there is no spatial dimension at play within bio-cultural heritage practices, notions of 'territoriality' and 'rootedness' were rarely employed to justify heritage practices and only at play marginally within the field and not as prevalent as expected. The only context in which heritage crops were connected to regionality was during one table conversation during the ERF/GOED event. This raises questions on the Dutch context and how Dutch bio-cultural heritage is not used to produce territoriality whereas scholarly literature does elaborate extensively on this relation. The Dutch context is possibly as strongly defined by innovation and adaptation within a historically rapidly changing agricultural

landscape, that territoriality within agriculture is less present than in other contexts. Temporal narratives of going *back, reversed* innovation and *future*-smart farming were explicitly more present. Therefore, the graph provided in the theoretical framework is more appropriate to understand the field in the adapted version in which the spatial dimension is removed, as presented below:

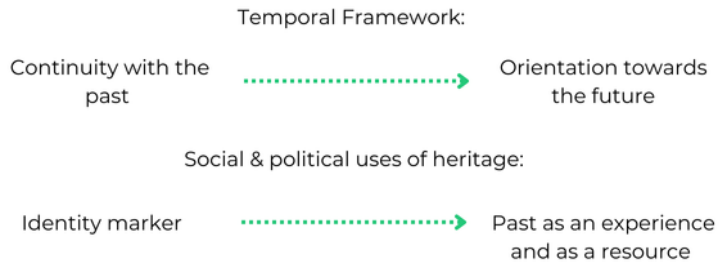


Figure 4 - adapted visualization illustrating the paradigm shift within bio-cultural heritage

Adding to that and building on the adjusted visualization, the work of Bortolotto (2024) indicates a necessary shift within the "age of sustainable development" in which past-orientated heritage conservation is eminently progressing towards a future-focused safeguarding paradigm. However, the field showcases that this is not a linear process. Rather, different narratives coexist and shape eachother within the same context. In a political polarizing climate that is increasingly turning back to conservative values, traditional conservation narratives can possibly be readopted by (new) heritage practitioners. Therefore, I suggest another modification to this visualization which reflects the ambiguous and non-linear shifts among heritage practitioners:

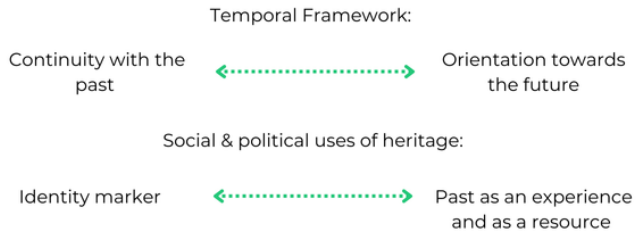


Figure 5 - adapted visualization illustrating the paradigm shift within bio-cultural heritage

Continuing, in both heritagization narratives, the tendency of universalizing incommensurable particular pieces of heritage is at play. In both past-oriented and future-focused narratives heritage crops and varieties are conceptualized as pillars of a large-scale truth. For example, in a past oriented narrative, heritage grains are a site of envisioning a pre-industrial past where one could go "back" to, whereas in a future focused perspective, heritage grains are a means for future-smart farming and a genetic resource to ensure food security. In both ways, heritage grains are reduced and universalized which instrumentalizes bio-cultural heritage into different developmental frames of sustainability or economic opportunities.

It is crucial to highlight the implications of these diverging discourses within the landscape of conserving heritage crops and varieties. A former member of the *Oerakker* described the failure of the platform that attempted to unite heritage practitioners across the field as follows: "Everyone had their own goals, which is why not everyone was on the same page. When everyone shares the same objective, it becomes easier to accomplish projects." (interview 11, Veenhuizen, 11/12, authors translation from Dutch) Other former *Oerakker* members also complained about the *Oerakker* being a club with too much talking and nothing getting from the ground. This shows that attempts to join forces among heritage practitioners have been challenging because of different objectives and

different conceptions of heritage. However, the uniting and collaborating of heritage practitioners who justify their practices through different narratives is not necessarily the ultimate goal. Although joining forces would increase and amplify the voice of heritage crops and increase the possibilities for putting the conservation of heritage crops on a larger political agenda, there is also a serious risk in homogenizing the conception of bio-cultural heritage. The constructed, ambiguous and conflicting nature of bio-cultural heritage that was set forth in this thesis helps us understand that it is not a matter of appointing the most truthful conception of bio-cultural heritage. Such an endeavor would polarize and harden borders (Porciani, 2019b). In fact, acknowledging the constructed nature of bio-cultural heritage is necessary to question what needs to be conserved and why and to open up the possibilities for heritage practitioners to cooperate.

Care & heritage as situated knowledge

Heritage is what one *inherits* and is in that sense inescapable. Bio-cultural heritage is situated within the broader heritage of the ruins of global capitalism, which again shapes bio-cultural heritage, of which both past-oriented and future-focused heritagization are a product. The ruins of capitalism are described by Tsing (2015) as "that which is left behind when capitalist structures and forms recede from particular landscapes and sites, leaving people to piece together livelihoods in the aftermath". In fact, bio-cultural heritage is not only situated in the ruins of global capitalism but can be understood as part of the ruins themselves (Cavanaugh, 2023). Past-oriented bio-cultural heritage conservation is shaped by resisting globalized capitalist food production systems, and future-focused heritage safeguarding derives from the diversity loss induced by globalized capitalist food production. This demonstrates that bio-cultural heritage is not inherently good nor universalizable, and that all crops and varieties that are made into being *as* heritage are entangled in different temporalities, power structures and local contexts.

Heritage crops are historical conjunctures: specific buckwheat varieties could have been part of the Bell-Beaker culture diet whereas a certain cabbage variety could have emerged within early plant-breeding techniques of the beginning of the 20th century, corresponding with growing power concentrations within the privatization of seed. Yet, both varieties can be labeled as bio-cultural heritage. This underscores the absence of any pure or singular heritage identity. Recognizing heritage as a constructed and fluid concept, where past and future intersect, allows practitioners to adopt a more open and reflexive approach to conservation.

Recognizing the social and historical power dynamics that have shaped the landscape broadens the notion of bio-cultural heritage and its presupposed superiority. Instead of adhering to simplified truths of standardized models of progress or nostalgic imaginaries of purity and naturalness, this acknowledgement allows for imaginations of creative assemblages that is described by Tsing as a "polyphony", where "autonomous melodies intertwine" (Tsing, 2015). Viewing heritage crops as assemblages could enrich heritage practice. It shifts the focus from conserving specific crops and varieties as ends in themselves, to considering these specific crops as bearers of stories that tell something about how agricultural landscapes are changing in uneven and unequal ways. This unfolds the complex nature of nostalgia and the power dynamics that are at play within labeling certain crops and varieties as heritage. Agricultural crops and varieties have always been shaped by bio-cultural exchanges; no food remains untouched by the culture of others. This reality deconstructs myths of purity and naturalness, revealing heritage crops as living records of historical entanglements that have shaped both local and global foodscapes.

Here I turn to the work of Donna Haraway (1988) who advocates for a situated knowledge in opposition to all-encompassing truths: the care for heritage crops and varieties is in need of situated knowledge, which is concerned with profound relationality and understanding heritage crops as historical conjunctures, acknowledging that heritage crops are an expression of complex political, technological, biological and cultural entanglements of changing and simplifying rural communities and landscapes.

However, this thesis does not aim to take a relativistic position in which all conceptions of bio-cultural heritage are supposed to equally coexist. Rather, this research has been an attempt at setting forth the powers that shape heritage crops and varieties and the narratives that are employed. These different narratives are not equally valued across the field but also expose unequal power balances in which one knowledge system dominates the other by appropriating objectivity, or in which situated knowledges are turned into mere traditions in which oppositional categories are created. Heritage crops as situated heritage knowledge opens up the possibility for different ways of knowing (Haraway, 1988). As described in the introduction, contemporary agriculture faces an unprecedented decline of bio-cultural diversity within the fields resulting in various crises. This loss of heritage crops and varieties and all the situated knowledges and traditions they carry is irreversible. The nostalgic response or the deployment of heritage as a resource, is a means of not acknowledging this loss by creating a myth of immortality. Facing this loss is an invitation for mourning. Not as passive grief but as an active practice that integrates loss into heritage work in a vital way, to integrate heritage crops in a way that is still possible (Haraway, 2015). By denying the irreversible loss of bio-cultural diversity, we deny our mortality, Haraway argues. Loss is not either behind us or yet to come, rather, loss is reality. Therefore, the conservation and safeguarding of bio-cultural heritage, in which heritage crops are understood as situated, is a crucial practice to rethink and counter the - unintentional - reproduction of the narratives set forth in this thesis.

Within both literature and data collected at the field, on the one hand heritage crops were mostly connected to conservation within past orientated bio-cultural heritage projects. On the other hand, future orientated heritage practices within sustainable development narratives relied predominantly on safeguarding. The notion of 'conservation' fits in the logic in which relics of the past need protection to maintain heritage crops as they are. Within this framework, conservation is valued over creation (Bortolotto, 2024). The shift to safeguarding implies the paradigm shift discussed in this thesis. Change lies at the heart of the safeguarding concept and is deployed to describe a set of measures aimed at ensuring the viability of heritage (Bortolotto, 2024). To describe the practices around bio-cultural heritage that fits the idea of situated knowledge, I'd like to propose to move beyond the binary of either conservation or safeguarding and suggest 'care' as a more holistic framework for engaging with bio-cultural heritage. Within the school of thought of feminist scholars like Tsing and Haraway, care is understood 'as an ethical practice and attitude that implies relationality between actors and their environment' (Gabauer et al., 2021). Caring for bio-cultural heritage embodies the interweaving of bodies of human and non-human bodies in a life sustaining web.

On researching bio-cultural heritage

Within this research, I have attempted to engage with the bio-cultural heritage field in the Netherlands in a qualitative and exploratory way which hasn't been done extensively in the social sciences yet. I have explored how theoretical debates on bio-cultural heritage are played out in the field of the Netherlands. Through employing art-based research methods in which I invited the

senses during the ERF/GOED event, I had the opportunity to both bring heritage practitioners from diverse backgrounds to the same table whilst entering a reciprocal relationship with my participants. This enriched the data collection of this thesis and created a space in which the heritage crops themselves were invited to the table too.

Nevertheless, despite the efforts to describe a dispersed and gradual paradigm shift within the field of bio-cultural heritage practitioners, this research can unintentionally have reinforced dualisms between the social and the ecological, the past and future. In having opted for a framework in which I categorized narratives, I possibly simplified the complex dance of heritage making. Furthermore, although I described the risks of universalizing processes of heritagization that are at play within intrinsically incommensurable crops and varieties, I also reproduced this universalization to a certain extend as I did not differentiate between specific crops and varieties as I studied a diverse range of heritage practitioners committed to incredibly varied products. I approached them all as heritage practitioners although their practices, contexts and foci differ greatly. As a result, I have struggled, and continue to struggle, with my relationship to my participants. I want to approach and interpret their narratives holistically to do justice to their practices and beliefs, yet I also find myself confronted with the limits of translating their convictions into an academic framework without reducing their depth and complexity. This illustrates the sensitivities discomforts that come with conducting qualitative research. For future research, I would recommend focusing on heritage-making within a specific crop or variety, as this could allow for richer, more sensory, and more detailed data collection. Such an approach would foster a more layered discussion, countering the reproduction of universalizing heritage. Beyond the universalization of specific crops and varieties, the contexts in which bio-cultural heritage conservation is studied also cannot be generalized. The Dutch context, for example, is heavily shaped by histories of expansion, progress, and growth, as well as the early adoption of intensive agricultural techniques such as wetland drainage and land reclamation for polder creation. Already within the Netherlands, different regions ascribe different meanings to bio-cultural heritage. More broadly, distinct national and agricultural histories shape landscapes in ways that profoundly influence how bio-cultural heritage is conceived. Additionally, as noted earlier in this discussion, the notion of locality has not been as prominent in this thesis as expected. This may reveal something about the Dutch context, where regional connectedness appears to play a less significant role in heritage-making compared to other contexts explored in the literature. Future research could further investigate the interplay between locality and heritage, examining the dynamics of rootedness and regionality within the heritage field. This may require shifting to a different context outside the Netherlands to conduct comparative fieldwork.

Lastly, the power dynamics within agribusiness in seedbanks and heritage saving and the corresponding valuation of institutionalized knowledges in contrast to informal knowledges, is a crucial part of heritage institutes such as the CGN which was not highlighted thoroughly in this thesis, although this makes bio-cultural heritage-making highly political. Therefore, it would be extremely valuable if future research on the conservation of heritage crops in the Netherlands would focus on the dynamics on what knowledges are legitimized and what knowledges are silenced.

Amidst urgent times of political polarization, increased agricultural corporate control and the large-scale vanishing of bio-cultural heritage from the fields, this thesis has proven the relevance of understanding the layered nature of a practice of care within bio-cultural heritage. Despite the questions and debates, the expansion of heritage practitioners and therefore the expansion of conceptions of bio-cultural heritage opens up new possibilities by extending the conversation on what we want to conserve. Not only is heritage performative, but so is research concerning heritage

as it contributes to bringing something into being. Therefore, acknowledging the creative force of research as a social scientist, I hope to have contributed to the creation of heritage crops that are found outside the conventional fields.

> "To change our understanding is to change the world, in small and sometimes major ways"
> (Gibson-Graham, 2008).

Conclusion

Within this thesis, I have explored the different narratives shaping heritage crop conservation in the Netherlands. As bio-cultural diversity rapidly declines and contemporary industrial agriculture induces severe “genetic erosion” (FAO), understanding these dynamics proves increasingly relevant. Yet, the conservation of bio-cultural heritage referring to heritage crops and varieties is not a straightforward practice. Rather, it is shaped by diverging, and at times conflicting, narratives. On one side, heritage crops are conserved within traditionalist understandings of heritage, rooted in nostalgia and resistance to globalization. On the other, they are increasingly framed within sustainable development discourse, where conservation is driven by concerns over future diversity loss. In this research, I have examined how these narratives unfold in practice and discussed the implications of their coexistence within the field of heritage crop conservation.

To analyze these dynamics, I engaged with Bortolotto’s (2024) framework on the paradigm shift in bio-cultural heritage, which describes how heritage is increasingly shaped by sustainable development logic. Through qualitative ethnographic methods, I studied a diverse and dispersed network of heritage crop practitioners in the Netherlands, ranging from farmers, gardeners, and researchers to activists and hobbyists, embedded in both institutionalized as informal spheres. My research primarily took the networks surrounding the Center for Genetic Resources at Wageningen University and the Ark of Taste, an initiative of Slow Food, as a starting point.

In the first empirical chapter, I examined the notions of naturalness, purity, and rootedness that underpin traditionalist bio-cultural heritage narratives, often reflecting a sense of nostalgia, and legitimizing the perceived superiority of heritage crops and varieties. This superiority is constructed through a fixed set of norms and imaginaries, often embedded in perfectionist utopian visions (DuPuis & Goodman, 2005). Across different networks and crops, a nostalgic longing for a pre-industrial landscape emerges, positioning heritage as a counter-hegemonic force against globalization. Yet, within this same logic, heritage crops are increasingly instrumentalized as markers of social distinction, where taste and exclusivity become central to their conservation.

In the second empirical chapter, I turned to the shifting discourse in which bio-cultural heritage is increasingly understood as a genetic resource, aligning with sustainable development goals (Bortolotto, 2024). This narrative is characterized by fostering rather than resisting change, in which ‘the future’ has become the time shaping dimension and in which not heritage, but humans themselves have become object of protection. Nevertheless, this shift does not replace nostalgic conservation narratives but exists alongside them, shaping a fragmented and multilayered landscape of heritage-making. While sustainable development is widely accepted as a necessary framework, its interpretation remains contested and context dependent. The anticipation of future loss shapes the safeguarding of heritage crops, yet this rhetoric risks aligning with capitalist logics of progress and growth. Within this paradigm, heritage crops and varieties are often reduced to their instrumental value, serving as genetic tools for achieving sustainability rather than being understood as dynamic cultural and ecological entities.

This thesis has attempted to unpack the tensions and complexities at play within the landscape of heritage crop conservation in the Netherlands. What emerges is a field in constant flux, where heritage crops are subjected to both nostalgic and elitist narratives, as well as narratives of progress and innovation. The practices around heritage crops are not static endeavors, but a negotiation between continuity and change, shaped by the practitioners who engage with it.

To move beyond totalizing narratives, whether the romanticized imaginary of conservation or the reductionist framing of heritage as a resource, I propose understanding heritage crops as assemblages of capitalist, biological, cultural, and social entanglements. This perspective, rooted in Haraway's (2013) notion of situated knowledge, allows for a more nuanced engagement with heritage crops as dynamic, context-dependent entities. It challenges the idea of heritage as something fixed, instead embracing its multiplicities and contradictions. By recognizing heritage crops as situated assemblages, conservation practices can become more reflexive, adaptive, and attuned to the diverse realities shaping bio-cultural heritage today. This shift does not offer a singular solution but rather opens space for alternative ways of knowing and practicing conservation, ones that acknowledge both the urgency of biodiversity loss and the complexities of how heritage is made, valued, and contested.

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