



WHAT'S COOKING

AN INTRODUCTION TO CULINARY TRANSLATION

Here's a look at culinary translation as a specialization, including some of the main challenges encountered and tips on how to develop your skills!

By Olivia Singier Texier



Before the pandemic, part of my experience of traveling to a place was trying out the local food, taking market tours with local guides, or dining in the best restaurants in town. Food traditions and culinary arts are huge parts of any culture and lie at the heart of our cultural identity. Food is how people express themselves, show their history, and their story. I bet you probably wouldn't even be able to name the thousands of regional culinary specialties to be found in your country alone.

Globalization has been changing the food we eat and how we eat it. Immigrants have always brought food traditions from their native countries that have then been assimilated into the local cuisine of their new home. For instance, according to cookbook writer and anthropologist Claudia Roden, the quintessential British “fish n’ chips” was first introduced in Britain during the 16th century by Jewish immigrants forced to leave Spain and Portugal.

We're now familiar with many dishes originating across the world and regularly enjoy *tacos*, *paella*, *tiramisu*, or *brioche*! On the global stage, it's interesting to note that some food cultures prevail over others. For example, ordering a latte is much more usual than ordering fried spiders, a staple rooted in some local cultures such as Cambodia. With a greater variety of food and ingredients available and the globalization of food production and distribution, there's a greater need for documents and labels—and a greater need to translate them.

You may have noticed the increased interest in cooking and gastronomy during the past few years, especially during the pandemic. The volume of food-related material in need of translation—not only cookbooks but TV programs and websites—has been hugely amplified. But words are not enough, and often a photo of whatever may be on our plates at a given moment can be posted on Instagram or Pinterest for the world to see (a trend called “food porn”).

A Variety of Assignments

Culinary translation isn't limited to translating cookbooks and recipes, but any material related to the food and drink industry: food and wine publications, product labels, material about health and nutrition, restaurant menus, blogs, and websites, to name a few. Engaging in culinary translation may lead you to translate a wide variety of texts.

For those in the food and drink industry, hiring a professional translator ensures high-quality work, including thorough proofreading. Beyond the stupid typos and ludicrous texts, incorrect information on food labels can have devastating consequences for people with special diets or food allergies.

Cookbooks

As stated by Henry Notaker in his *History of Cookbooks*, culinary books have existed for thousands of years but haven't always had the same consistent structure and style seen today. They've witnessed an ongoing evolution. According to Notaker, the first cookbook dates back some 3,700 years and was written on clay tablets. Before the 18th century, Notaker explains that cookbooks were intended for rich, literate people and written by men for men in a narrative style, with ingredients and instructions appearing as one block of text. In the earliest cookbooks, ingredient quantities were often listed according to price or size. In

the absence of kitchen timers or affordable clocks, Notaker says that the earliest cookbooks often reference prayers to describe cooking times (e.g., boil as long as it takes to say six Hail Marys). The recipe gradually took its current form in the 19th century.

How recipes were presented in cookbooks also evolved over the decades. The addition of technicolor photographs around the 1930s was a turning point in the evolution of cookbooks, the addition of rich colors grabbing the reader's attention. (And who would consider buying a cookbook with no photos today?) However, the process for color printing was difficult and the price of color reproductions greatly affected how many color photographs appeared in cookbooks and magazines, which explains why black and white photographs or illustrations remained popular. Radical changes in color photography in the late 1970s and early 1980s, transformed by Japanese color printing technology, gave a much better clarity of color to the images. This development was one of the factors that led to an increase in the number of magazines dedicated to food.

There has now been a shift away from general and traditional cookbooks. This new generation of cookbooks conveys more than recipes accompanied by colorful photographs, providing readers with a social and historical context that takes them somewhere and tells a story. Today's cookbooks tend to specialize,

offering recipes from a specific country or region, addressing specific diets, or types of ingredients. This shift also allows for new voices to be heard as cookbooks embrace a more diverse global food community.

Be an Expert and Expect Some Challenges

While you don't need to be an accomplished cook to be a successful translator in this field, it does help to prepare and taste the dishes and ingredients you're attempting to adapt to new cultures and environments. One critical aspect of translation is knowing the intended audience. Actually, this needs to be your first concern since you wouldn't translate a recipe the same way for experienced cooks, children, or even male cooks.

As I said before, translating food-related documents is about translating a different culture. You should expect many culture-specific elements and find strategies to deal with them. Here are a few points that sum up my specialization, with a focus on the recipe text.

Know Your Terminology:

Culinary texts are similar to technical texts and require familiarity with technical jargon (e.g., cooking techniques and utensils). Do you know the difference between "caramelizing" and "browning"? How do you translate "baste" in your target language? Being an experienced cook definitely helps, but using quality reference books (e.g., the encyclopedia of gastronomy



Resources on Culinary History

Roden, Claudia. *The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samarkand and Vilna to the Present Day* (Knopf, 1996), <https://bit.ly/Claudia-Roden>.

Notaker, Henry. *A History of Cookbooks: From Kitchen to Page over Seven Centuries* (University of California Press, 2017), <https://bit.ly/Henry-Notaker>.

My number one reference book for culinary translation is *Le Grand Larousse Gastronomique* (Larousse France, 2012), <https://bit.ly/Le-grand-gastronomique>.

Larousse Gastronomique: The World's Greatest Culinary Encyclopedia (Clarkson Potter, 2009), <https://bit.ly/Larousse-Gastronomique>.

"Cooking the Book with Yotam Ottolenghi and Nigella Lawson," *Gastropod* (March 18, 2018), <https://bit.ly/Gastropod-Yotam-Nigella>.

Elias, Megan. *Food on the Page: Cookbooks and American Culture* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), <https://bit.ly/Megan-Elias>. Elias is a historian and director of the gastronomy program at Boston University.

You can visit <https://bit.ly/Lille-culinary> for more information on the culinary conference at the Université de Lille (November 30–December 2, 2021)

Larousse Gastronomique) and consulting parallel texts in your source and target languages are essential. When in doubt, feel free to consult with professionals. And just like for any specialization, make your own glossaries. It takes time and effort, but glossaries save you much time in the end.

Know Your Ingredients:

This may seem obvious with simple ingredients like peanut butter or sweet potatoes, but differences in scaling and labeling may need additional research, particularly dairy products like milk and eggs. For example, you may also be less familiar with intralinguistic discrepancies between British English and American English. When crossing the Atlantic, several ingredients change names, including cuts of meat, produce, and many more. Do you know the difference between muesli and granola, shrimp and prawn, cilantro and coriander, and flapjacks and pancakes?



Still Interested in Culinary Translation?

Here are a few tips that I either got from other experienced culinary translators or that I've been thinking about over time.

Better if You Have a Passion for Food! You love cooking and knowing everything about cooking? Perfect!

Educate Yourself! Enroll in a professional course or masterclass. There are also plenty of culinary certifications (e.g., cheese or wine).

Read, Watch, and Listen to Material about Food and Drink: For example, watch *MasterChef*—a series in which amateur chefs compete in a series of cooking challenges overseen by a panel of accomplished chefs—in your target language. Subscribe to culinary magazines in your source and target languages. There are also plenty of podcasts available, and they're a great way to learn while driving or walking the dog!

Connect with Other Translators: Join specific groups on social media, such as Foodie Translators on Facebook. Connect with professionals on LinkedIn or Instagram.

Write about Food and Drinks: I recently created my blog on food and translation and embarked on a project entitled #AroundTheUSin50Recipes. Is there any better continuing professional development than cooking and translating?


Know Your Measures: When I started translating culinary texts, I found dealing with measures extremely nerve-racking. Knowing American and/or imperial measurements and their correspondence in the metric system is time-consuming. Help was available with online converters and ready-made tables, but I soon started creating my conversion spreadsheets. They do save me much time.

Know Your Target Culture: Translating the names of recipes can pose problems when they refer to a cultural element or a play on words.

Titles should be informative and appealing, so we need to be creative sometimes. How would you translate a sandwich called "Rich Boy" in your target language? When an ingredient is unavailable in your target culture, can you find an equivalent? How do you deal with brand names? Once again, perfecting your knowledge of both the source and target culture's ingredients and products is paramount.

Make Your Translation Invisible: Your translation must read as fluently as the original. This requires adapting the text to your

target-language norms. This topic would need to be covered in a separate article as it implies many syntactical considerations. It's mainly about making your translation user-friendly.

It seems that 2021 is bringing us back to a new normal with in-person events such as workshops and conferences. ATA62 in Minneapolis will be an amazing opportunity to reconnect and enjoy the company of others. If you're interested in culinary translation, the Université de Lille (France) is organizing an international conference in November. The details can be found at <https://bit.ly/Lille-culinary>. 



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