

FOOD MATTERS

# What We Write About When We Write About Food

Since the days of the Greeks, writers have been consumed by their meals. But are we writing about food — or is food a metaphor for something less palatable?

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“TELL ME, MUSE, of the dinners, much-nourishing and many in number.” So wrote the Greek poet Matro of Pitane in the fourth century B.C., stealing the exalted opening of the “Odyssey” (“Tell me, Muse, of the man of many ways”) for his “Convivium Atticum” and memorializing in epic hexameter a tale in which there are no heroes, only eaters, and no perils to overcome, just food upon food, in mocking homage to the “Iliad”’s catalog of ships massed for Troy: loaves “whiter than snow”; 13 “very fat” ducks; an eel the length of nine tables; and so many fish and of such kind and season as would have been impossible to serve all at once. The only suffering is a distended stomach.

To the Greeks, or at least those aristocratic enough to qualify as Matro’s audience, this was parody. Food, as the subject of poetry, was ridiculous. The desire for it, beyond what was needed to survive, spoke to baser instincts. (Philosophers distinguished in a meal between *sitos*, the staple, and *opson*, the relish, and warned against overly prizing the latter.) To care too much about what you ate made you a glutton, an epithet applied to another poet of the fourth century B.C., Arcestratos of Gela, who braved the seas in pursuit of local specialties, a proto-Anthony Bourdain. “To hell with saperde” — a kind of cured fish — “and those who praise it,” he grouses in his gastronomic litany the “Hedypatheia,” of which only fragments survive. He denounces tiny fish as no better than excrement, save for the finer specimens caught in the waters off Athens, and offers, as cooking instructions, a brusque “Don’t burn it up.”

Yet this voice of more than two millennia ago is uncannily recognizable to readers of today: declarative, hyperbolic, gossipy and confiding, faintly aggrieved, assuming, perhaps unearned, a mantle of authority and even omniscience (“Few people know which food is wretched and which is excellent”), giving freight to the smallest bite, finding rapture in what sates. In short, Arcestratos was a food writer. Or so we might label him now, as kin to those specialists of our own time, the literary-minded cooks who know that every recipe comes with a story; the memoirists who recall each meal as half debauchery, half revelation; the journalists who stake out tailgates and backyard barbecues; and the critics who skulk into restaurants in disguise, brandishing words like knives.

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But what separates a food writer from someone who just happens to write about food? As with any compartmentalizing of genre, there is something in the title that implies a diminishment, as if today, as in ancient Greece, the act of eating were too frivolous to be worthy of serious meditation. Matro aimed for comedy in the excesses of his dinner-party verse, but the tone of Arcestratos’ work isn’t so clear, and he was disdained by later scholars for daring to imagine that, in compiling an index of culinary pleasures, he was “laying the foundation of some science likely to improve human existence.” Still, when contemporary food writers (and, I suppose, I am one) stray from celebrating flavors to probe the larger issues surrounding the parade of dishes to our tables — exploitation of labor, abuse of animals, climate change, the homogenizing of cuisines and cultures under globalization, systemic injustices that allow millions of people to go hungry each year — some readers complain. Food should not be political, they insist. Food is universal; food unites us. Let us have our cake in peace.

OF COURSE, PEOPLE have always written about food. Our earliest surviving recipes were carved into tablets in Mesopotamia nearly 4,000 years ago; a text from the same millennium includes a spoof menu of seasonal dishes featuring ingredients like donkey haunch and the excrement of dogs and dust flies. (Scatological humor is evidently equally eternal.) The Greek historian Herodotus, in the fifth century B.C., minutely documented the foodways of “barbarian” (i.e., non-Greek) cultures, mostly from information that was obtained secondhand and sometimes fantastical — he observes that the Persians pile on desserts, while the Scythians drink horse milk and prefer their food boiled — and it remains a question whether this was intended to make these foreigners seem more alien, and thus inferior to the Greeks, or to show, through the common act of eating, how much people are the same.

A literature dedicated to food, however, beyond manuals on the technicalities of cooking, is of more recent vintage. In Paris in the mid-18th century, there emerged the peculiar institution known today as the restaurant — originally, the word signified the kind of restorative consommé served at such places — which yielded, in the early 19th century, the first restaurant critic, Alexandre-Balthazar-Laurent Grimod de La Reynière, who published culinary guidebooks and a monthly journal for which he convened friends to sit in judgment on the city’s chefs. The epicure Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s weighty “The Physiology of Taste” (1825) elevated eating to a discipline for

historians and philosophers, a tradition furthered in the 20th century in the West by writers who made cookbooks meant to be read, not just followed, and who changed the way people and even entire nations ate and thought about food, from Elizabeth David and Claudia Roden in England to Edna Lewis and Madhur Jaffrey in the United States. Today, there is so much written about food, in so many forms and outlets, that it can be difficult to define as a coherent genre.



It's notable, then, that "food writer" did not come into American usage until the 1930s, and it was a specifically professional term. Proliferating food corporations sought to woo customers by publishing cunning pamphlets in which snippets of poems and quotes from 19th-century luminaries such as Brillat-Savarin and the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli — "The most delicious thing in the world is a banana," he wrote to his sister in 1831 while sojourning in Cairo — appeared embedded alongside recipes for the likes of heart-shaped Wonder Bread "honeymoon" sandwiches and cocktail glasses filled with California canned asparagus tips and tomato aspic, served "very cold." The targets of such advertising, and often the writers of it, were women, who at the time were responsible for running the household. (In 1932, National Business Woman magazine fielded queries from readers as to "what courses in home economics ought I to take to become a food writer?") Even in journalism, food was viewed as a domestic matter and limited to what were called, dismissively, the women's pages.

Then, kitchens changed. In 1920, a little more than a third of American homes were equipped with electricity, but by 1930, that number had nearly doubled, and the widespread adoption of modern appliances — gas and electric stovetops in the 1920s, refrigerators in the 1930s — alleviated the hardship of preparing meals. This made it possible to view cooking as a leisure activity and an opportunity to show off, and that's when husbands began to muscle in. The mainstream media took notice. In 1940, Esquire launched a food column touting the superiority of masculine taste, *Man the Kitchenette*. (Never mind that the author, Iles Brody, had gained notoriety for reportedly beating his girlfriends and attempting blackmail.) Two years later, The New York Times deputized its first food editor, Jane Nickerson. She was the first to use the term "food writer" in its pages, although she also drolly (and perhaps biting) referred to members of her profession as "the palate press" in a 1949 report on an haute cruise-ship meal of braised celery hearts and Dom Pérignon, presented by a male chef who proclaimed that "the art of cooking is like a beautiful woman — indescribable," which may have left his audience wondering why they'd been invited to describe it in the first place.

By the 1970s, newspapers across the country were churning out stand-alone food sections, staffed mostly by women. Their work was popular but not respected, and was suspected of existing only to promote the products of food companies whose ads kept the newspapers afloat. Eventually, these food writers drew the ire of Senator Frank Moss, Democrat of Utah, a champion of consumers' rights, as chronicled by Kimberly Wilnot Voss in "The Food Section: Newspaper Women and the Culinary Community" (2014). In 1971, invited to speak at the National Conference of Food Editors in Chicago, Moss baldly asked the assembly, "Ladies, are you the pawns of your advertising managers ... or are you journalists?" and then branded them "whores of the supermarket industry."

The women hissed. Some walked out. A group of them would go on to form their own professional organization and draft a strict code of ethics to stave off further accusations. Although Moss railed about opening a Senate investigation, nothing happened. (As Voss points out, there was the problem of the First Amendment, after all.) Meanwhile, the editors in chief and owners of the newspapers and magazines the women worked for, who determined the scope of their stories and were predominantly male, went blithely on their way, never called to account.

CONSUMERISM IS A "revolt against the unresponsiveness of government and industry to the crying needs of the public," Moss told Congress in 1971. He was an idealist, however bungled this particular episode in his crusade. Half a century later, consumerism has triumphed, although not in the sense that Moss understood it, as fighting on behalf of consumers against unfair business practices, but in the pejorative form of a society that privileges the consumption of goods above all, even above the rights of the workers who make them. Notably, "food writer" didn't truly enter the American vernacular until the early 21st century in the wake of "Kitchen Confidential" (2000), Bourdain's coruscating behind-the-scenes exposé of his own life as a chef running a restaurant. Although the book was in part a testament to the unseen labor that goes into every dish, the main takeaway for many readers was Bourdain's advice never to order fish on a Monday (because it may be left over from a Friday delivery). They identified with the customers — rather like readers of Upton Sinclair's 1906 social-realist novel, "The Jungle," who were more outraged by the prospect of tainted food on their plates than by meat packers forced to work in filthy and dangerous conditions.

We don't mind product promotion now, although we still don't like the idea of writers being bribed to do it; we want to believe we're being urged to buy things because they really are that good — because we *like* to buy things. The food writer Molly O'Neill noted in 2003 that the people who bought the most expensive kitchen appliances tended to cook the least, transforming cooking into a "spectator sport." Food writing, in turn, had devolved into food porn. "There is a place in newspaper food sections and food magazines for cheery, revisionist, nostalgic waxings; for songs of dew-kissed baby lettuces; for Proustian glances back," she writes. "But there is a line between soothing readers' anxieties and becoming the Victoria's Secret of the Fourth Estate."



How can food writing soothe readers when food itself is the locus of so much social anxiety? This is the hidden thread that runs through food writing from the ancients to today that threatens to pull and unravel. The British social anthropologist Jack Goody has argued that the advent of cuisine as we know it — as opposed to the food eaten by everyone in a particular community — is predicated on inequality: When one group gains control of a larger share of resources and access to ingredients from other regions, making and eating food of increased variety and complexity become a way to mark status. Going further, the British sociologist Stephen Mennell has suggested that the extreme stratification of society is insufficient, yielding only differences in quantity, not quality, of food; what drives culinary innovation is rather the emergence of closer-knit, competitive classes jockeying for power, with those on lower rungs exerting “pressure from below.”

So when we write about food, we are already writing about class struggle. “The cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure,” the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote in 1966. To read about an extravagant meal can be a vicarious substitute for not being able to afford one or make us feel superior to those who waste their money on such follies. We especially love tales of astronomically priced meals gone wrong, from the Times critic Pete Wells’s calm, lucid evisceration in 2015 of the “brutally, illogically, relentlessly” expensive Japanese restaurant Kappo Masa on Manhattan’s Upper East Side — “a pantomime of service ... an imitation of luxury” — to the travel blogger Geraldine DeRuiter’s viral takedown last December of the Michelin-starred Bros’, in Lecce, Italy, in which 27 courses were served, consisting mainly of “slivers of edible paper,” “glasses of vinegar” and “12 kinds of foam,” including one sprayed into a plaster cast of the chef’s mouth and drooling down one side, for the diner to lap up with her tongue. Such stories confirm that the emperor has no clothes; that we’re not missing a thing.

IN THE “HEDYPATHEIA,” Archestratos mentions silphium, a wild herb believed to be akin to asafetida and since lost to history. The plant was so coveted it was overforaged, and by the first century A.D., according to the Roman historian Pliny the Elder, only “a single stalk” could be found; Archestratos was its elegist in advance without knowing it. What we gain in the complexity of cuisine inevitably has a cost in labor and on the environment. Maybe the nostalgia that O’Neill fears is the default for contemporary food writing is, in fact, nostalgia for the present, which is slipping ever more quickly into the past, and even nostalgia for the future, one we may never have.

M.F.K. Fisher, arguably the greatest American food writer, if not one of the greatest writers across the board, was exquisitely nostalgic, but she had wickedness, too. When she published her first collection of essays on food, “Serve It Forth,” in 1937, The Times deemed it “delightful” but the material “unfamiliar and odd.” To this day, she eludes categorization; to say that she wrote about food is like saying that Virginia Woolf and James Joyce wrote about dinner parties. In “The Gastronomical Me” (1943), she recalls the banality of childhood meals under the iron glare of her grandmother, who, along with “unhappy millions of Anglo-Saxons,” had been schooled in the principle “that food should be consumed without comment of any kind but above all without sign of praise or enjoyment.” A new cook comes in for a few weeks and the results are baffling and thrilling, leaving Fisher in “a kind of anguish of delight.” Then, one evening, the cook doesn’t return, and it turns out that she has killed her mother and herself, with the very knife she’d wielded so expertly in the kitchen.

It’s a gruesome twist, but this does not dim the cook’s aura in Fisher’s eyes. She mourns but retains the “consciousness of the possibilities of the table” and grows up to be herself the kind of cook — and writer — determined to shake people “from their routines, not only of meat-potatoes-gravy but of thought, of behavior.” And, more forcefully: “To blast their safe, tidy little lives.” Surely there is no better mantra for a food writer today, wallowing in scraps and swinging for the stars. What more could we give our readers? For what is the point of reading about food or, for that matter, reading about anything at all: to look in a mirror, or through a window; to escape the world, or to discover it?

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