

# Food Matters: *An Introduction*

FEW THINGS IN the culinary world captivate me as much as stories and articles about tuna fish. But this pedestrian fish rarely feeds the interest of food enthusiasts. So, one can imagine my delight when I ran across an issue of *Saveur*, a self-styled foodie magazine that “authentically” explores the diverse palates of the world’s cuisines, devoted to my fish of choice. On the cover of this issue was a photograph of carefully arranged cans of tuna fish from around the globe. As I read the article I could discern the author’s passion for canned tuna fish. I appreciated his contention that canned tuna fish (not to be confused with fresh ahi tuna, the favorite of sashimi aficionados) is a sublime food, capable of evoking deep pathos. Yet I could not help but feel that his love for canned tuna fish paled in comparison to my deep-seated love for this brine-infused marine edible. But to make sense of this, I must first explain my own idiosyncratic love affair with tuna fish, which has nothing to do with the actual taste of tuna, and everything to do with my coming into my own as a racialized subject.

In April 1982, my family moved away from Penang, Malaysia, and for the first time I found myself having to eat lunch at school. When I first started carrying lunch to school, my mother would pack a lunch consisting of rice and dahl and rice and yogurt into a tiffin-dubba, a split-level metal lunch container. My white Australian classmates would look on in curiosity at my “weird” lunch in a “strange” container. My rice and dahl were nothing like the tuna fish sandwiches they would carry in their pink plastic lunchboxes adorned by the likes of Strawberry Shortcake. Over time, the snickering and odd looks became too much, and I begged my mother to buy me a plastic lunchbox and to let me have tuna fish sandwiches. Eventually she relented, and when the day finally arrived that I had tuna for lunch, I was visibly excited; I was that much closer to losing my status as “Other” and becoming like my white classmates, or so I believed. But upon

opening my lunchbox, I found something entirely different. My mother had “Indianized” my lunch and created a bright yellow tuna fish sandwich filling spiced with green chilies, cilantro, chopped onion, and turmeric.

This early food memory remains etched in my mind, not just because these spicy yellowed tuna fish sandwiches are my unquestioned comfort food of choice, but also because it marks a particular food-mediated racial tension. In my school setting, food was a visible way to mark ethnicity and difference. At the ripe old age of seven, I conjectured that if I ate the same types of foods as my friends, I could be like them, and lessen the trauma of being so viscerally different. When I look back on my curried tuna sandwiches, they were my mother’s attempt to combine Indianness with apparently “Western” fare. I wanted them to help me try to assimilate, but ironically, they merely reinforced my otherness.

Some years ago, I fortuitously encountered an autobiographical essay by the Indian American writer Geeta Kothari. In her essay, “If You Are What You Eat, Then What Am I?”, selected as one of the *Best American Essays of 2000*, Geeta includes a narrative about wanting to eat tuna fish sandwiches. She describes how her mother, despite being unable to tolerate the odor of fish, purchases tuna hoping to satisfy her daughter’s desire for American food. Geeta realizes that her mother does not understand that the other children’s mothers transform the pink-toned fish into tuna salad by adding unmistakably white mayonnaise. Geeta laments that her parents disappoint her because they are not like other parents, who “help us negotiate the world outside, teach us the clues to proper behavior: what to eat, and how to eat it.” Her story transported me back to my own experience, poignantly articulating how immigrants are racialized by the foods we wish to consume, both publicly and secretly. In a conversation at a Thai restaurant in San Francisco some years later, Geeta and I shared our fish stories, suspecting that others, like us, might have similar tales about lunchtime edibles and coming of age in multiracial societies. To display one’s culinary heritage to the mainstream was to pave the way for racism (even in a benign

form) to rear its ugly head at our expense, and so our tastier “ethnic” foods—yellow tuna fish sandwiches and sushi rolls—were jettisoned for bland but acceptable “all-American” tuna salad sandwiches and PB&Js.

For some time I have tried to find stories that might speak to the ways in which racialized immigrants and communities of color in the United States use food to explore the classed, racialized, and gendered dimensions of their personal and collective identities. While food writing has been experiencing unprecedented levels of popularity, few authors connect food with the messy and often unpalatable issues of race in the United States, opting instead to examine how food affirms cultural identity and ethnicity. In the U.S. we are obsessed with tasting diversity. As the cultural critic Frank Wu observes, Asian food items, ranging from the familiar fried rice, egg rolls, and sushi to newer “exotic” items like green-tea ice cream, bi bim bap, or pho, are regular features at many ethnic food festivals organized in towns or cities across the United States, but rarely will food vendors serve up culinary unmentionables such as dog stew. Exploring how the taboo against dog eating shows where our principles concerning diversity conflict with our actual practices of tolerating diversity, and what the mainstream might consider intolerable, unethical, unpalatable, and inedible, Wu compellingly articulates the real difficulties involved in confronting difference in understanding foodways. He concludes, “Our festivals of diversity tend toward the superficial, as if America were a stomach-turning combination plate of grits, tacos, sushi, and humus. We fail to consider the dilemma of diversity where our principles conflict with our practices” (216).

With this in mind, I embarked on my quest to find narratives that would showcase the multiple and often contradictory ways in which food haunts the cultural imagination. How, indeed, might we conceptualize individual and communal relationships to food practices, confronting the dilemma of diversity without naively celebrating it? Why is food so integrally linked to the way immigrants think about their experiences? In an age of culinary

globalization, why do we continue to associate Japan with sake, Russia with vodka, France with foie gras, Spain with paella, Greece with moussaka, India with curry, or Korea with kimchi? Domestically, why have African-Americans been historically associated with collard greens, watermelon, chitlins, and fried chicken? Why do some African-Americans refer to others in their community as “oreos”? Analogously, how do we understand the use of the term “banana” or “twinkie” in the East Asian-American community, or “coconut” among South Asian-Americans? Why, despite the popularity of fusion cuisine, do we continue to follow the lead of the nineteenth-century gastronome Jean Brillat Savarin in thinking that people are what they eat, and that the destiny of nations depends on the manner in which they nourish themselves?

The pieces that form this collection speak powerfully to these issues, carefully delineating and unearthing why food is so affirming of cultural identity at the same time that it is frequently the first and only point of contact that mainstream America has with racialized ethnic America. Collecting theoretical pieces, creative nonfiction, poems, short stories, and essays, this special issue showcases new writings that trouble the easy conflation of food and an affirmatory logic of inclusive multiculturalism. But as the pieces in this collection suggest, that love affair is often ambivalent, at once affirming of cultural identity while serving as a violent reminder of how food is inextricably bound to issues of class, race, and power. This volume deliberately and strategically collects work by writers who might not typically be considered food writers. Many of them are emerging writers of color, many are scholars, and all of them are deeply moved by the place that food plays in our psychic, material, and racial lives. For the purposes of this volume, they have shared writings evoking the cultural-political dimensions of food consumption, production, and preparation, while countering the tendency to neatly align food and identity.

The Arab American feminist and writer Joanna Rose Kadi challenges us to think about what it means for people who have lost so much to unselfishly share recipes and stories with the

world, particularly in light of the havoc wreaked upon Arab American communities since September 11, 2001. Kim Cohen shares history in a radically different way. Her own library meanderings through the 1800s as chronicled in cookbooks and domestic manuals lead her to cull through the pages of her Aunt Adelaide's recipes in her home. At each turn, Cohen reflects on what these recipes mean to her—personally and intellectually. Sharon Heijin Lee and Rachael Miyung Joo explore how their coming into their own as racialized Korean American women in California has everything to do with learning to embrace foods deemed peculiar and offensive by others. What prompts these questions? For Lee, it is eating her mother's gimchi chigae; for Joo, it is thinking about her father's labor and eating chamoe, a Korean melon.

Spanning locales from rural New England to the Midwest, Tonya Becerra, Johnson Cheu, Sejal Shah, and Shymala Dason chart narratives about eating, location, dislocation, and the consolidation of racialized ethnic identity outside of metropolitan North American centers. On the verge of a return to the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts from Brooklyn, Shah reflects on the changing meaning of food in the various communities to which she belongs. Becerra writes about her love affair with mac and cheese as a Korean adoptee who came of age in Kentucky. Dason tells a tale of a Malaysian Indian couple living in Bennington, Vermont, who painfully grapple with the affective and material consequences of trading purportedly less palatable Malaysian foods for a sterile but acceptable version of "American" cuisine. And finally, the narrator of Johnson Cheu's poem is prompted to think about the sweat and labor of immigrant generations as he ponders the texture of ruby red pomegranates.

The scholars Martin Manalansan and Sharmila Sen each turn to the genre of the personal memoir to chart a narrative about food, dislocation, and travel. Sen's research on foodways in Indo-Caribbean literature leads her to try to understand the neat alignment between food and nation. What does it mean to eat Indian food in Trinidad? How does one adjudicate between taste, "authenticity," and histories of colonialism through foods which

seem Indian but are unmistakably Trinidadian? Manalansan unravels the complicated bases of yearning for Filipino food: how food might facilitate temporary escapes to other spaces, how eating Filipino food might enable an imagined return, if only briefly, to New York, or how undocumented Filipinos in New York, with no way to return physically to the Philippines, might affectively and alimentarily return home through their taste buds.

Rita Wong's and Bryan Tomasovich's poems centering on genetically modified foods cast the terms of food politics in another light, specifically inquiring into the ethics of food production. Donna Gelagotis Lee's "First Night in Athens" alludes to the problems and pleasures of cultural and culinary translation. Lee's poem asks how one's tongue might negotiate familiar Greek tastes and contours of words that are not always so familiar to one's ears. Jane Chi-Hyun Park's poem "Tribute" speaks of a different relationship between food and expression. It is as much about the difficulty of knowing how to express love, melancholia, and sadness as it is about finding comfort in food.

Although the contexts are radically different, Amy Wan, Marilyn Jackson, Malak Roya Hamadani, Brooke Nelson, and Bunkong Tuon collectively examine how the weight of the past, and the ghosts that haunt, powerfully inform and nourish the individual's spirit. Wan writes about how oranges remind her of her mother's labor in their New York kitchen, Jackson tells a story about a Polish American child who channels the spirit of a Jewish child killed in Treblinka, Hamadani speaks about the memories of an excommunicated brother and a father who refuses to acknowledge his son. Brooke Nelson presents a scenario in which the act of consuming cilantro and shrimp pasta leads one to imagine what might nourish her god's appetite. Finally, the Cambodian American writer, Bunkong Tuon evocatively mediates between stories about the past, a mother and father the narrator barely remembers, and a present centered on familial life in Long Beach, California, and Malden, Massachusetts.

Shirley Geok-Lin Lim's "Identifying Foods, Identifying Selves," Tiare Rose Bent's "Bran Affection," Roshni Rustomji's "American Dhansak and the Holy Man of Oaxaca," Daniel Jernigan's "Los

Chicarrones,” Sharon Mizota’s “On Leftovers,” and Purvi Shah’s “As you try to clean a near-empty Indian can of patra leaves,” “On being vegetarian in Puerto Rico,” and “The Country inside Myself” imagine how food consolidates ethnic identity. In so doing, each interweaves the personal with narratives about specific foods—dhansak, mole, fried egg sandwiches, tapioca, bran, rambutan, chiles, chicarrones, pomelo, jaga-imo manu, leftover pizza, patra leaves, slabs of meat—to create a narrative that flouts the very conventions by which we have come to establish an easy and comfortable relationship between food, consumption, and difference.

It has been said that Americans have an ongoing love affair with food, but the writings included here refuse to be categorized as merely cultural works that speak to “universal” concerns about what it means to be a human being. Rather, they look at the everyday politics of food, unraveling what has allowed America to have a love affair with certain cuisines, while deeming others offensive and unpalatable. At the risk of overusing culinary puns, the offerings here are bittersweet, delicious, and evocative. Sometimes the stories are painfully raw, dealing with unpalatable issues, sometimes they linger, leaving a sweet aftertaste, but they are all richly varied and implode what it means to think about food, race, gender, and class in a polycultural United States. As such, this collection of new writing about the everydayness of food affirms that now, more than ever, food matters.

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#### WORKS CITED

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