

FOOD GUILT



What's eating you about what you eat?

In simpler days, "food guilt" might have meant illicitly eating meat on Fridays or failing to achieve membership in the clean plate club. Today there's almost no aspect of food—from its production on pesticide-clogged factory farms to its vacu-sealed sale at corporate-controlled supermarkets to its ultimate feared appearance on our hips—that doesn't inspire guilt.

Why such a basic act as eating has become so weighed down with moral baggage is the subject of our lead article, by restaurant reviewer and ethics columnist Jeremy Iggers. He explores how food has become the last bastion of morality in contemporary American society, while other writers represented here examine food taboos, fetishes, and other gustatory preoccupations.

Given our concerns about hunger, sustainable agriculture, and health—and our less pressing but equally obsessive worries about calories—it's sometimes hard to keep in mind what food is truly meant for: to nourish us, sustain us, and delight us, to help us celebrate together as families, communities, and friends.

Innocence lost

Our complicated relationship with food

Consider just how guilt-ridden our relationship with food has become. Today, there is hardly an element in the American diet that doesn't carry some moral stain.

Bumper stickers remind us that meat is murder, and magazine ads confront us with gruesome pictures of anemic penned-up calves, brood sows chained to concrete slabs, hens stuffed in wire mesh cages, downed cattle in slaughterhouses. We turn away but the images remain. The pride we once felt in producing the cheapest food in the world has given way to guilt over how it is produced: over the exploitation of farmworkers; the profligate use of pesticides and synthetic fertilizers; the destruction of family farms, rural economies, and the natural environment.

We feel guilty, too, about eating foods that contain too much fat and too much cholesterol. This goes far beyond a prudent concern for our health and appearance; it takes on strong overtones of guilt and moral judgment as we wrestle with our own weakness, with our inability to keep our bodies under control. And this isn't a moral judgment we impose exclusively on ourselves; it is also a judgment that we make on others, and they on us. To paraphrase Will Rogers, it's no sin to be fat, but it might as well be.

For parents, these feelings are amplified: The Natural Resource Defense Council didn't choose a white-coated scientist to spread the message about Alar, the suspected carcinogen used as a ripening agent for apples; it chose celebrity mother Meryl Streep, to link

the issue of toxic chemicals to parents' deep feelings of responsibility.

We also feel guilty for enjoying such plenty on a planet where so many are hungry. As our diet becomes more exotic—mangoes imported from Haiti, basmati rice from India, gourmet coffees from Ethiopia and Tanzania—it drives into sharper focus the contrast between how we comfortable Americans eat and live and how the billions of hungry people on the planet struggle to survive.

It wasn't always this way. There was a time, or so it seems in retrospect, when eating was a simple pleasure, and Americans tackled it with less sophistication, and more gusto, than anyone else in the world. Steak was king of the table, but there was always room for Jell-O. We'd open the lunch box to find a baloney sandwich and a couple of Oreos, and we were satisfied. If we weren't really living in a Garden of Eating, we at least had our innocence.

Something happened, rather abruptly, in the early '60s, right around the time that Julia Child published *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Before Child, food was simply something we ate. Since then, it has become a core element of our identity. The serpent offered Adam and Eve a bite of the apple and, having bitten into it, they beheld their nakedness and felt shame. Child offered us a bite of tarte Tatin, coq au vin, and *blanquette de veau*, and our innocence came to an end. We looked at our Jell-O molds and tuna casseroles and Hostess Twinkies and recoiled in shame.

Once this new self-consciousness about food took hold, the rest was only a matter of time. Food today has become eroticized, politicized, fetishized, and invested with symbolism and moral power as never before in American society.



CLAES OLDENBURG, SHOESTRING POTATOES SPILLING FROM BAG, COLLECTION WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS, GIFT OF THE T.B. WALKER FOUNDATION, 1966.

Only after this climate was established could Cesar Chavez seize hold of the nation's moral imagination, showing us how the purchase of table grapes or iceberg lettuce could be a moral choice, or Frances Moore Lappé make the same connection a few years later between our appetite for beef and the issues of hunger and environmental destruction.

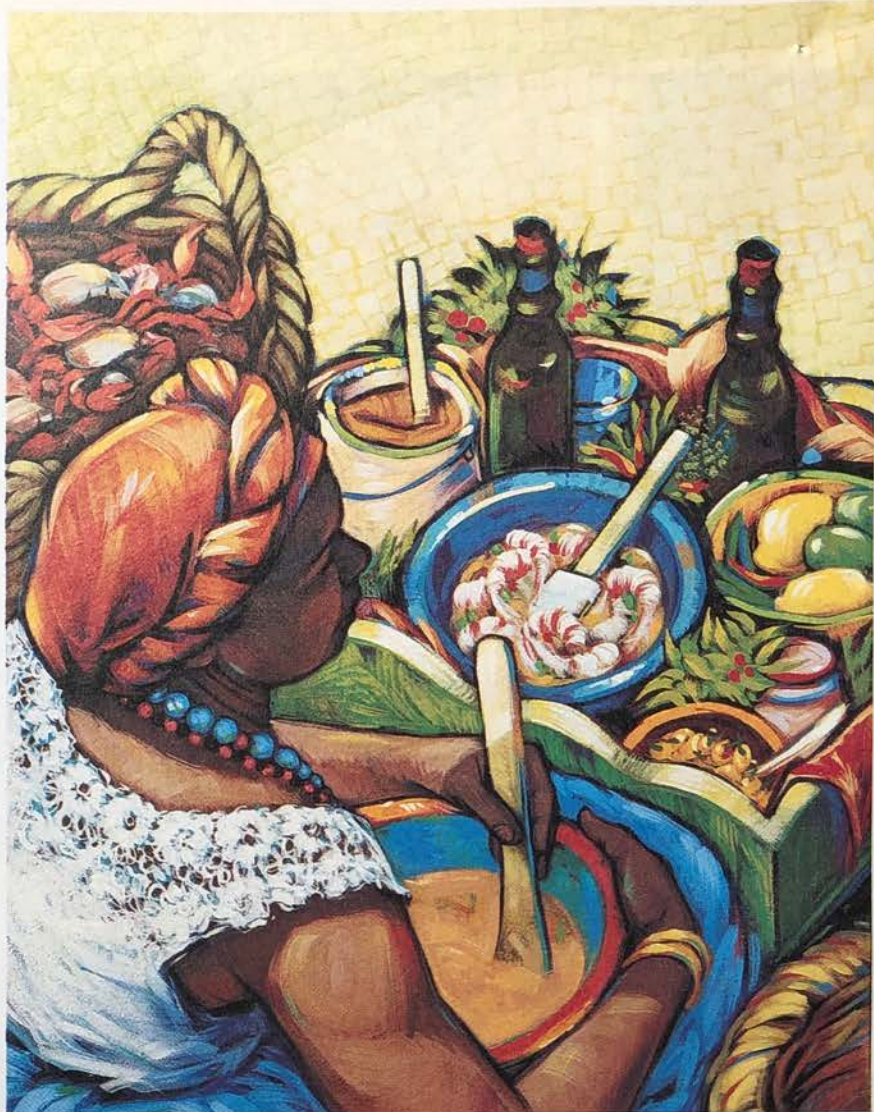
It was also in the early '60s that the eroticization of food took hold of mass culture in unprecedented ways. When Tony Richardson's film *Tom Jones* appeared in 1963, its erotic feasting scenes were regarded as a breakthrough. Today, it's hard to turn on the television or open a magazine without encountering sensuous, glistening images of food—often enlisted in the marketing of such mundane merchandise as fast food burgers and bottled salad dressings. A mound of whipped cream, a dewy bunch of grapes, a tawny turkey—food has become sexy, while sex has become problematic.

The increasingly stringent ideal body type promoted by the media is, of course, closely correlated to our guilt over eating. It's hard for most of us to eat three squares a day and still look like Cindy Crawford or Patrick Swayze. It's no coincidence that increasingly emaciated models appeared in fashion ads simultaneously with the explosion in reported cases of bulimia and anorexia, and a big boom in the diet book and diet food industries.

But if it is remarkable how riddled with guilt our relationship with food has become, it is even more noteworthy how much our morality has become centered on food. The word *sinful* is hardly ever used today except in connection with dessert. It would be wrong to dismiss this as mere metaphor: According to one recent study, single women who have affairs with married men are generally untroubled by feelings of guilt; by contrast, many dieters feel powerful guilt and self-loathing after succumbing to a pint of Häagen-Dazs.

It's not unusual at all to hear a woman wail, "I was so *bad* today," only to follow this dramatic statement with a seemingly tame admission like "I ate two doughnuts and a bag of Cheetos." And most waiters today describe dessert trays with the same lascivious smirk a sex show barker might use to describe the delights within.

In part, guilt about food represents a shrinking of the realm of morality from a once-majestic kingdom to a beleaguered enclave. Psychologists have carved out much of the territory, persuading us that conduct we once called good or evil is better understood in terms of psychopathology. And though the war is still being fought, there has been a large popular uprising aimed



LORI LOHSTOETER

Of smells and spills, olive oil and wine

The kitchen as joyous workroom

I FIRST SAW SHELVES OF COOKBOOKS, HANGING COPPER POTS, AN OVER-flowing spice rack—first drank wine and first ate garlic, olive oil, kosher salt, and soups made with homemade stock—in Carol Braider's kitchen. I was 15 at the time and because of my upbringing expected kitchens to be as sterile as hospital rooms. You went into them carefully for snacks, made no mess, and at dinner you cleaned your plate, did the dishes, and did not linger. It was a high compliment to declare that some housewife's kitchen floor was clean enough you could eat off it.

Carol Braider's kitchen smelled of food and cooking; there was no attempt to hide what took place there. Her stove was crusted with spilled food

and her refrigerator crammed with leftovers—it was what my grandmother called a pigsty. As she cooked, Carol drank wine, and dishes were as much improvised as built from recipes. Her aprons were spotted and stained, and she was constantly hovering, tasting, stirring, adding pinches of this and that.

When you dined at Carol's table you were expected to smoke between courses, to drink a few glasses of wine, to talk over coffee. Carol's husband, Donald, was my teacher, and when I came into their house as a baby-sitter and had my first meal there, I was appalled and fascinated. We ate spaghetti with a sauce that was *not* meatballs, and their poodle, Bucky, ate with us—I can still see the strands of pasta disappearing one after another into his curly black muzzle. Growing up, I was usually put off by the strange odors in friends' kitchens. But Carol's kitchen did not repulse me. There was so much life and so many mysteries in the place that I was drawn to it.

My awareness of food as more than sustenance, of the lore of cooking, eating, and drinking, began in the Braider kitchen. Carol's kitchen meant freedom to me; although I was fed liberally at home, like any middle-class child of the '50s, I was confined to a dull menu and a tense dinner hour.

My mother must have felt similar constraints, for as she got to know Carol she began to consult French cookbooks, use wine in sauces, and generally let her kitchen and her cooking go. She had always loved to eat and had a lumberjack's appetite—she was forever going on a diet tomorrow. Yet before Carol's influence my mother's cooking was as bland as her kitchen was spotless, and her dinners had as much to do with discipline as with food.

My father was a doctor, a general practitioner, and five nights a week he held office hours, first in a room off the kitchen and then at his office in a local shopping center. When he came home at sundown he wanted food on the table. If my mother served us a dish fixed—she never “prepared” a meal—in a new way, he ate it without comment in ostentatious silence. In response to her asking if he liked it, he'd snap, “I'm eating it, ain't I?” He half meant this to be funny, but he had so little gift for humor that the effect was most often deadening.

During the day my mother used the rod of my father's coming home to dinner to try to keep us in line. When he arrived, my mother served up our crimes with the casserole, and the meal quickly became a court in which we were lectured and punished—so many nights early to bed, so many afternoons doing yard work. As he harangued us, we either wolfed our hamburgers, hot dogs, or tuna casserole so as not to be hectorated about

our lack of appetite or, baleful night, pushed our food around our plates, food we had to force down even on an ordinary night: liver, broccoli, lima beans. Frozen Ford Hook lima beans cooked in a pressure cooker resembling the kaiser's helmet! Limas that were a stomach-turning green, mealy *and* slimy, and even drowned in catsup . . . impossible to force down. My brother and I could not be members of the clean plate club no matter the threats that rained down on us: “You'll stay here and finish your dinner even if it takes until hell freezes over.” It's no wonder I still inhale my food, as if to escape the table.

Just as mealtime was a penance, cooking, for the cooks of my childhood, and eating, for all of us, were forms of labor. Throughout my childhood I heard women complain of slaving over a hot stove, of working their fingers to the bone fixing dinner, and of men who wouldn't lift a finger. Given the extraordinary plenty of this country, it seems strange that we didn't enjoy ourselves more, but we didn't seem to know how.

In Carol Braider's kitchen I experienced a mixture of leisure and total attention. Every move Carol made mattered and could be enjoyed in itself; every cheese, cut of meat, sauce, piece of fruit, and hunk of bread had a history, imparted some knowledge, and therefore possessed a presence. I remember watching once as Carol made cassoulet with its traditional goose fat, mutton, and pigs' hocks. It was a snowy March afternoon, and she cooked from a thick book warped by butter, oil, and a hundred different sauces.

Certainly there was turmoil—and sometimes sharp words—as Carol cooked, but there was also the intense pleasure of watching someone in love with her work, and the special pleasure of listening and talking while you are doing something else at the same time. Carol seemed to be free to do as she pleased, and this sense of freedom was liberating for me. Carol made food that tasted good, sometimes great—but the greater pleasure came from enjoying food for its own sake. In this way the humblest sausage or a dish of leftover cassoulet has dignity. And so does the man or woman who sits down to savor it.

—William Corbett
Antaeus

Excerpted with permission from the literary journal Antaeus (Spring 1992 issue: “Not for Bread Alone: Writers on Food, Wine, and the Art of Eating”). Subscriptions: \$30/yr. (4 issues) from Ecco Press, 100 W. Broad St., Hopewell, NJ 08525. Back issues: \$15 from same address.



at overthrowing the dominion of morality over our sexual lives.

So why, at a time when morality is in retreat in almost every other sphere, has food become so morally problematic?

Let me offer a theory: At the heart of this new food guilt is a migration of both our eroticism and our moral focus from our groins to our guts. There is, I'll

Our eroticism and moral focus have migrated from our groins to our guts.

grant, still plenty of moral anxiety about sexuality, but not nearly as much as there once was. Is it mere coincidence that while participation in the Catholic sacrament of confession has declined dramatically, millions of Americans now pay to participate in that commercialized ritual of self-disclosure, the weekly Weight Watchers weigh-in?

In the Victorian era, when there was still a vibrant public world, the core of personal identity was thought to be found in how one connected to the social world—thus

the tremendous emphasis on honor, duty, and, above all, sex, that most intimate and defining connection.

Sex was therefore fraught with moral perils, and immeasurable passion; a sexual transgression was a threat against the social order. Today, it's increasingly regarded as a private matter, largely because there is no social order in the old sense. It's of considerably less interest to everyone, including, often, the participants.

As society has become more individualistic and private, we have learned to express and understand ourselves mostly in terms of what we consume. We take the fact that we avoid red meat or can distinguish a cabernet sauvignon from a pinot noir to be important indicators of who we are, and of how we are different from or better than others. And in a culture in which consuming rather than connecting is the central motivating force, it is only natural that eating has more erotic potential than sex. Small wonder, then, that eating has also become more morally troublesome.

Our first impulse in dealing with food guilt, as with any other type, is to run away from it, and there are certainly plenty of books and self-help gurus who will teach us how to eliminate guilt from our lives. But those techniques of the est variety rarely

Food as a four-letter word

What if food was dirty and sex was clean?

WHEN YOU THINK OF IT, THERE ARE ONLY TWO THINGS YOU NEED TO MAKE people. You got to have sex. You got to have food. That's it. You don't need clothing, shelter, or TV. Okay, maybe TV, but otherwise, it's sex and food. But for some reason, sex is dirty. Maybe God was a Republican. Somebody said, "All right, you want to propagate, go ahead, but only late at night, with all the doors closed, man on top, once a week, that's it." But not only can you eat the charred decaying flesh of other major mammals, you can do it in broad daylight and invite all your friends to watch: "Hey, Chuck, why don't you come over on Sunday? We're going to kill a pig, cut him up, burn him, and eat him. Bring the kids, have a hell of a time."

What if they had been switched around? What if, through a simple twist of fate, sex was clean but food was dirty? Our entire culture would change. Food would become a four-letter word.

- When people got angry at you, they'd yell out "Oh yeah? Well, food you. Suck cheese you Popsicle slurper."

- Punks in passing cars would flip you the fork.

- Flashers would have pizzas strapped to their chests. "Ohmigod. It's pepperoni."

- Locker room talk would change. "Hey, man, how'd you do this weekend?" "Two burgers and a bag of fries. Crinkle cut."

- Garlic would be illegal in most Southern states.

- Supermarkets would check I.D.'s and charge admission to the poultry section.

- Frederick's of Hollywood would feature peekaboo napkins and day-of-the-week paper plates.

- Foreplay would be listed as a menu selection.

- Vice squads would conduct raids on backyard barbecues. "All right, put down your meat. Just back away from the buns, mister."

- Vegetarians would be prohibited from becoming teachers and a lot of them would move to the Bay Area.

- Most suburban school districts would ban home ec.

- Hookers would become cooks. You'd be accosted on street corners by plump ladies in Day-Glo aprons. "Hey, big boy, looking for a hot meal? Wanna crack some crab?"

- Fundamental Christians would make meat and potatoes a religious tenet.

work, and when they do, the result is a sort of moral lobotomy, a loss of connection to our innermost selves. The Vietnamese Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh cautions against the Western tendency to try to cut away those parts of the self that we find painful: "Therapists want to help us throw out what is unwanted and keep only what is wanted. But what is left may not be very much. If we try to throw away what we don't want, we may throw away most of ourselves."

A better approach, argues Rabbi Harlan J. Wechsler, author of *What's So Bad About Guilt*, is to develop a discriminating conscience that recognizes when guilt is appropriate and when it is not. Rather than becoming slaves to guilt, we can listen to it, make peace with it, and try to understand its meaning. Some of its messages—like those that condemn us for not being slender enough

or pure enough in what we eat—we can weigh and reject. But others may have real meaning for us: Deep down, most of us really don't want to cause suffering to other sentient beings, don't want our standard of living to come at the expense of people we exploit, and do want to live in a way that is sustainable for future generations. And it's no surprise, nor is it wrong, to feel troubled when we feel one way and live another.

It's a powerful act of self-affirmation to take these concerns seriously, to ask how your food choices can reflect your values. This can be a purely negative screening: You can choose not to eat veal, to buy only "free-range" chickens or "dolphin-free" tuna, to eat no meat at all, to eat grapes or lettuce only if they are picked by unionized farm workers, to buy no food from tobacco company subsidiaries. But living your food values can

also mean taking positive steps: choosing vegetarian and organic foods, shopping at food co-ops and farmers' markets, supporting food shelves and meal programs, becoming a partner in community-supported agriculture. All of these acts are more than ways to avoid guilt; they are constructive moves toward creating a better world.

But making careful choices as a consumer, although this is important, may not be enough to assuage food guilt if its true source lies in a deeper kind of hunger: the hunger for meaning. In a society in which public life is in decay, we have come to expect that this hunger for meaning will be satisfied in private choices; indeed, the constant message of consumerism is that we can find that meaning in buying. If something is missing, we must be making the wrong choices. Maybe it's the meat. So we try vegetarianism for a while, but something is still missing. Maybe it's the boring casseroles, so we switch to Indian curries, buy gourmetware, and enroll in

cooking classes—but that doesn't work either. So maybe it was really the car, all along. Let's buy a new car.

But maybe the whole premise is mistaken. Maybe the key to food guilt, and to our hunger for meaning (and to healing and repairing the world, for that matter) lies beyond the realm of making the right consumer choices. Maybe it lies in rebuilding a public world.

Where the institutions of community are strong, individual contributions to the common good can be rich sources of meaning in our lives: "I know him—he's the guy who organized our block club." "She's the one



- Many sexual positions would be found to be carcinogenic.

- Parents would tell their children not to play with their food or they'll go blind.

- Kids would remember the first time their mother caught them marinating.

—Will Durst

Frisko

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KAY KURT, COLLECTION WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS, PURCHASED WITH THE AID OF FUNDS FROM THE NATIONAL EXPERIMENT FOR THE ARTS AND GIFT FROM THE BUTLER FAMILY FOUNDATION, 1981.

who got the new playground built." That's what it really means to be somebody.

Within the context of a strong spirit of community, even eating and its pleasures can be transformed. Whether it's at a Lutheran church supper or a Jewish Sabbath dinner, at a block party or a family reunion, when we gather together to celebrate, when we linger in

the moment, even the simplest fare can seem rich in our mouths and our memories—without tasting the least bit sinful.

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Good food, bad food

Listening to your body is the only way to judge what to eat

MANY OF US, WHETHER WE ARE AWARE OF IT OR not, have a laundry list of "good" foods and "bad" foods. Good foods

are those that are believed to be healthy and to somehow make you a better person if you eat them, and bad foods are believed to damage the body and to make you a bad person if you eat them. I suggest that there is no such thing as a good food or a bad food. I am not saying

that different foods do not have either positive or negative effects on health. I am saying that no food is *morally* good or *morally* corrupt. For instance, when people say sugar is bad, there is often a hidden judgment that sugar itself is evil. Sugar may have negative effects on health, but I know of no candy bars that have ever conspired to rot people's teeth. Nor do I know of any food that comes with a seal of approval from God and his legions of angels. Food is neither good nor evil. It is neutral.

This point is a subtle one, yet most important, for whenever we label a food "bad," we immediately start to fear it, think about it, fight it, sometimes crave it, and in many cases label anyone who eats this bad food a bad person. Labeling

chocolate as bad, for instance, sets up the internal dynamic that we must avoid it and protect ourselves

from it. The more we consider it forbidden, the more we will think about it and desire it. Since we view particular foods as bad, we consider our desire for those foods bad, which leads to seeing *ourselves* as bad for having the desire.

And if in addition we give in to this desire, then we punish ourselves by feeling guilty, or we deprive ourselves of the desired food for months.

The implications of seeing food as morally good or evil run even deeper, for in labeling food this way, we instantly suppress our natural flow of biological information. We cut off the rich and complex messages that the body would otherwise feed back to us about the food we are eating.

If you conclude in your *mind* that chocolate is bad, you have not experienced this in the *body*. You have made a mental conclusion without the necessary physiological input. It's like deciding your bathwater is too cold without ever having put your finger in it. Coming to food without any precon-



ceived moral judgments allows for biological exploration. How does the chocolate affect my energy level? Does it hurt my teeth? Give me a headache? Do pimples appear on my face the next day? Do I feel drained an hour later? Does chocolate have any positive effects on my body? Does a certain amount work well for me but anything more than that cause undesirable effects?

By listening to body feedback and being open and attentive to the food we eat, we begin to make connections and draw conclusions between what we eat and how we feel. We discover pertinent information about our individual nutritional needs that no book could ever teach us. If a food causes an undesirable reaction, all we need to do is choose not to eat it. We need not label the food or people who eat it as bad. A food that works well for one person may not do so well for another.

We might even conclude that a food has an undesirable effect on our health, yet we like the taste so much that we choose to eat it occasionally. It is fine to eat something that we know is not best for the body as long as we make this choice *consciously*.

—Marc David

Yoga Journal

From Nourishing Wisdom: A New Understanding of Eating by Marc David. Copyright ©1991 by Marc David. Reprinted by permission of Bell Tower, an imprint of Harmony Books, a division of Crown Publishers, Inc. Also appeared in Yoga Journal (Sept./Oct. 1991).

Is eating the oldest sin?

Obsession with food is a spiritual sickness

*Paradise
was very nice
for Adam and his madam,
until they filched the fruit and took the fall.
They lost their place
and fell from grace
and you can bet we can't forget
that eating is the oldest sin of all.*

—Victor Buono, *Heavy*

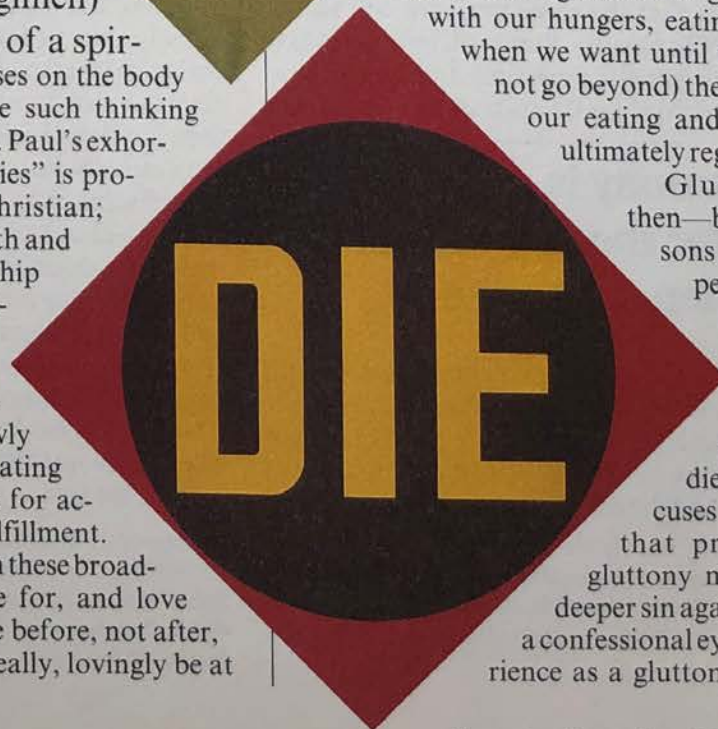
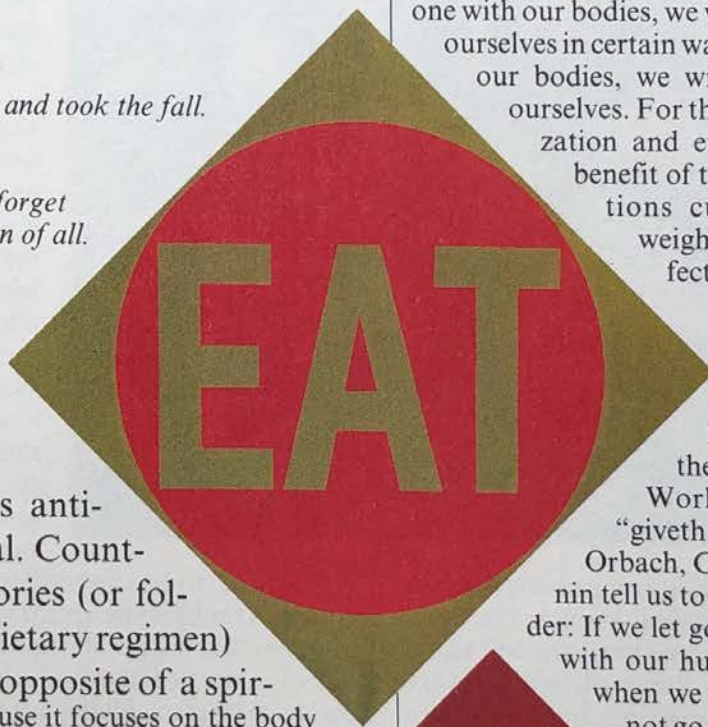
Dieting is anti-spiritual. Counting calories (or following some other dietary regimen) can become just the opposite of a spiritual discipline, not because it focuses on the body rather than the spirit, but because such thinking perpetuates a dangerous dichotomy. Paul's exhortation to "glorify God in [our] bodies" is profoundly wise and profoundly Christian; appropriate care for the body's health and nourishment is responsible stewardship of God's creation. But dieting is anti-spiritual because it focuses on a part of the created self at the expense of the whole. Counting calories (or whatever) focuses so narrowly on the size-obsessed "shoulds" of eating that it obscures our broader needs for acceptance, pleasure, nurture, and fulfillment.

The path of grace does focus on these broader needs. Learning to accept, care for, and love ourselves, in our bodies, must come before, not after, attempts to lose weight. If we can really, lovingly be at

one with our bodies, we will want to feed and nurture ourselves in certain ways; if we despise and distrust our bodies, we will misfeed and malnourish ourselves. For the overweight, weight stabilization and even weight loss come as a benefit of the loving path; wild fluctuations culminating in permanent weight gain mark the unhappy effects of hate and distrust.

A number of books on compulsive eating are beginning to focus on the path of acceptance, finally recognizing what Christian theology has known since Paul: Works destroy, whereas grace "giveth life."* Feminists like Susie Orbach, Geneen Roth, and Kim Cherin tell us to attune ourselves and surrender: If we let go of striving and get in touch with our hungers, eating what we want when we want until we reach (but do not go beyond) the point of fullness, our eating and our weight will ultimately regulate themselves.

Gluttony is a sin, then—but not for the reasons most often suspected. If gluttony were a sin of intemperance, a careful and restrictive diet would cure it, but dieting merely refocuses and perpetuates that problem. Rather, gluttony manifests an even deeper sin against trust. If I turn a confessional eye to my own experience as a glutton, I recognize two





HIERONYMUS BOSCH

basic motives behind my eating compulsively beyond the point of satisfying my physical hunger. The first is that I do not trust that the same pleasure will still be available to me in the future—that I will be able to have the food I want to eat the next time I want to eat it; therefore, I feel perversely as if I must stock up on it. The

Gluttony is a sin, but not for the reasons most often suspected

second is that I simply do not know what to do next with my time: I am terrified by the openness and loose-endedness that come when I stop eating, and I do not trust that I can figure out what to do next or that I can find something that will be as intrinsically pleasing and

**Editors' note: The terms grace and works used by the author can be defined respectively as unmerited love given to humankind by a loving God and the doing of good deeds to justify one's relationship to God.*

other hand, to be obsessed with not eating betrays an equally troublesome misorientation of priorities. To attend to the health of our bodies is appropriate stewardship, but to focus exclusively on our bodies, or to make judgments about people based on their body shape or size, manifests inappropriate worldliness. To feast is a fitting celebration of God's bounty; yet to fast is an equally fitting act of our disciplined devotion.

Eating may be "the oldest sin of all," as Victor Buono—along with a number of the desert contemplatives—proclaimed. Even so, the most primordial images of blessing are the table spread before us, the bread and wine of companionship, the land flowing with milk and honey. The supple soul is the one who joyously anticipates sitting down to the heavenly banquet—and who is able to do so with exuberant unconcern for whether or not the bread is buttered or the milk is 98 percent fat free.

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Growing hunger

10 percent of Americans are now on food stamps

The Greater Chicago Food Depository looks no different from the warehouses that surround it in this otherwise residential neighborhood on Chicago's West Side. What distinguishes it is the row of volunteers at work on a unique production line and the "product" that is stacked around them—food, tons of food. Huge shipments of cereal, market overorders, misprinted labels, discontinued products, dented cans, crushed boxes. The depository is the last refuge of forgotten foods.

At one time, these supply mistakes and marketing misdemeanors would simply have been thrown away, buried by the ton in landfills throughout the Midwest. Now local supermarket chains and big food manufacturers bring their excess or otherwise unsellable products to the depository, where the food is sorted and cleaned up or repackaged as necessary, the beginning of a short journey to homes where it will be welcome, whatever its merchandising flaws may have been.

The depository is a testament to the increasing sophistication and efficiency of the food distribution network in the United States. Last year, the Greater Chicago Food Depository distributed over 22 million pounds of food: 48,000 meals for every operating day, \$45 million worth of food. Those numbers make it the largest food bank in the world. It is the primary food source for over 500 food pantries and other food programs at shelters and soup kitchens scattered throughout Chicago.

The food depository is feeding a hungry city. Other food banks like it are feeding a hungry country. Almost 30 years after the United States initiated its war on hunger with various forms of federal assistance—food stamps, WIC (the women, infants, and children supplemental food program), and school breakfast and lunch programs—the specter of chronic hunger is once again threatening the country's most vulnerable citizens.

In March 1993, the United States reached a distressing milestone. A record 27.4 million people—about 10 percent of the nation's population and 9 million more



than as recently as 1989—were receiving food stamps. Advocates think that as many as 20 million more Americans may be economically eligible for food stamps. In many ways the faces of the hungry are familiar: poor folks, old folks, people scraping by on public aid. Between half a million and a million of the country's senior citizens are malnourished; 30 percent of all senior citizens regularly skip meals. Native American reservations, where people have trouble reaching government support services, remain often startling pockets of hunger. The hungry can be found among the nation's homeless and undocumented immigrants. But mostly, the hungry in the United States are still children. One child in four is growing up hungry, according to Bread for the World, a Washington-based international, interfaith policy agency.

Now, besides the familiar clientele, some new faces

are beginning to appear at food pantries across the nation. "We've always had people who were unemployed or on Social Security or AFDC [Aid to Families with Dependent Children]," says Barbara McCormick, director of the Interfaith Ministries' Hunger Coalition in Houston. "But today what we're seeing is more families, more long-term unemployed people, or people who are working but just don't have enough money to buy food."

This is being repeated in urban and "postindustrial" areas throughout the nation. The country's nouveau poor—recently laid-off workers, "permanent part-time" workers, industrial workers who are having to take jobs that offer a fraction of their previous salaries—are the new faces of hunger.

Many of these new hungry—because they do have some kind of work or have some property from a time when they had jobs—are discovering that they are not eligible for food stamps, so the aid from a local food pantry may be all the help they can expect. A report from the nation's mayors shows a 26 percent increase in emergency food requests in 1992 alone.

While the grim numbers indicate a serious problem, hunger experts note that people in the United States are not facing the dire starvation situation experienced by people in other parts of the world. "Mostly it's chronic inadequacy," says Bread for the World's Barbara Howell.

"People aren't hungry every day," says John Colgan, director of the Illinois Hunger Coalition. "It's



usually in a monthly cycle." His group's research indicates that the average family in Illinois exhausts its monthly allotment of food stamps a little over two weeks into any given month. "We don't have people starving to death in the streets, but we do have over 30 million people who do not have the food security they need to maintain an adequate diet," says Colgan.

Not since hunger became a focus of the war on poverty in the 1960s has "food security"—the ability of a typical family to maintain the level of nutrition necessary to good health and physical comfort—been as precarious as it is today. There are several reasons for this. Up

A diet of denial

Our obsession with weight loss has corrupted our relationship with food

This is an excerpt from a much longer essay Sallie Tisdale wrote for Harper's Magazine entitled "The Weight Women Carry" (March 1993).

FAT IS PERCEIVED AS AN ACT RATHER THAN A THING. IT IS ANTISOCIAL, AND curable through the application of social controls. Even the feminist revisions of dieting, so powerful in themselves, pick up the theme: the hungry, empty heart; the woman seeking release from sexual assault, or the man from the loss of the mother, through food and fat. Fat is now a symbol not of the personality but of the soul—the cluttered, neurotic, immature soul.

Fat people eat for "mere gratification," I read, as though no one else does. Their weight is *intentioned*, they simply eat "too much," their flesh is lazy flesh. Whenever I went on a diet, eating became cheating. One pretzel was cheating. Two apples instead of one was cheating—a large potato instead of a small, carrots instead of broccoli. It didn't matter which diet I was on; diets have failure built in, failure is in the definition. Every substitution—even carrots

for broccoli—was a triumph of desire over will. When I dieted, I didn't feel pious just for sticking to the rules. I felt condemned for the act of eating itself, as though my hunger were never normal. My penance was to not eat at all.

My attitude toward food became quite corrupt. I came, in fact, to subconsciously believe food itself was corrupt. Diet books often distinguish between "real" and "unreal" hunger, so that *correct* eating is hollowed out, unemotional. A friend of mine who thinks of herself as a compulsive eater

says she feels bad only when she eats for pleasure. "Why?" I ask, and she says, "Because I'm eating food I don't need." A few years ago I might have admired that. Now I try to imagine a world where we eat only food we need, and it seems inhuman. I imagine a world devoid of holidays and wedding feasts, wakes and reunions, a unique shared joy. "What's wrong with eating a cookie because you like cookies?" I ask her, and she hasn't got an answer. These aren't rational beliefs, any more than the unnecessary pleasure of ice

cream is rational. Dieting presumes pleasure to be an insignificant, or at least malleable, human motive.

I felt no joy in being thin—it was just work, something I had to do. But when I began to gain back the weight, I felt despair. I started reading about the “recidivism” of dieting. I wondered if I had myself to blame not only for needing to diet in the first place but for dieting itself, the weight inevitably regained. I joined organized weight-loss programs, spent a lot of money, listened to lectures I didn’t believe on quack nutrition, ate awful, processed diet foods. I sat in groups and applauded people who’d lost a half pound, feeling smug because I’d lost a pound and a half. I felt ill much of the time, found exercise increasingly difficult, cried often. And I thought that if I could only lose a little weight, everything would be all right....

The possibility of living another way, living without dieting, began to take root in my mind a few years ago, and finally my second trip through Weight Watchers ended dieting for me. This last time I just couldn’t stand the details, the same kind of details I’d seen and despised in other programs, on other diets: the scent of resignation, the weighing in by the quarter pound, the before and after photographs of group leaders prominently displayed. Jean Nidetch, the founder of Weight Watchers, says, “Most fat people need to be hurt badly before they do something about themselves.” She mocks every aspect of our need for food, of a person’s sense of entitlement to food, of daring to *eat what we want*. Weight Watchers refuses to release its own weight charts except to say they make no distinction for frame size; neither has the organization ever released statistics on how many people who lose weight on the program eventually gain it back. I hated the endlessness of it, the turning of food into portions and exchanges, everything measured out, permitted, denied. I hated the very idea of “maintenance.” Finally I realized I didn’t just hate the diet. I was sick of the way I acted on a diet, the way I whined, my niggardly, penny-pinching behavior. What I liked in myself seemed to shrivel and disappear when I dieted. Slowly, slowly I saw these things. I saw that my pain was cut from whole cloth, imaginary, my own invention. I saw how much time I’d spent on something ephemeral, something that simply wasn’t important, didn’t matter. I saw that the real point of dieting is dieting—to not be done with it, ever.

—Sallie Tisdale
Harper’s Magazine

Excerpted with permission from Harper’s Magazine (March 1993). Subscriptions: \$18/yr. (12 issues) from Harper’s Magazine, Box 7511, Red Oak, IA 51591-0511. Back issues: \$3.50 from 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.



through the late 1970s, advocates say, federal programs such as food stamps and school breakfast and lunch programs provided adequate assistance. But policies of the 1980s created a steady erosion of both the reach and the effectiveness of those programs at the same time as seemingly more urgent social ills like homelessness and the lack of affordable housing bumped hunger off the news media’s priority lists.

“But hunger has not gone away,” says Colgan. “It has only gotten worse. It is an invisible problem, though not to a trained eye. You walk by people every day who are hungry and lacking food security. They don’t have name tags identifying them.” While homeless people are visible on the nation’s streets, the hungry can be “someone who is dressed like you and me, and may be going to work,” says Colgan.

Colgan is quick to commend the work of the 50,000 private food banks and pantries throughout the United States, which he thinks represent a final, thin, and increasingly overburdened line of defense against a wholesale hunger crisis: “They really are carrying the weight that is keeping people [from] starving.”

Though government may have tacitly come to rely on private food pantries, Colgan likes to remind people that they aren’t the answer to the problem of hunger. “They’ve become an integral part of providing food security, but real security comes about when people have the income and the resources to buy what

they need without going to charity," he says.

As the number of hungry people increases, the strain on the fragile pantry networks will become more obvious. Jo Ann Jensen of the Greater Chicago Food

Chronic hunger contributes directly to the nation's soaring health care costs.

Depository thinks many of the pantries the depository serves already have to stretch their monthly food budgets—as their individual and family clients do, but on a larger scale.

Rural America is where the highest percentages of hungry people are to be found, says George Sanders, director of the Alabama Coalition Against Hunger. The irony is not lost on him: People in rural communities—where the United States raises most of the food it

uses to feed not only its own citizens but much of the world as well—go hungry themselves. That's because the infrastructure of rural communities is designed to get food out, not to distribute it within, says Sanders.

Many rural people, though they are eligible, do not get food stamps or other government food support. One reason is that social service agencies don't have offices in small communities, so visiting the right government office to maintain the paperwork can mean a 100-mile odyssey.

Also, people in rural towns are sometimes unwilling to apply for food stamps because it's hard to protect their privacy. Those who do may travel to other communities to avoid using food stamps at the grocery where they've shopped all their lives.

And while urban food pantries can expect monthly shipments of food surpluses from the federal government, rural pantries get shipments only quarterly, making planning difficult. That is, it would be difficult, Sanders says, if rural communities *had* pantries. Most don't. Sparsely populated counties are hard pressed to maintain a volun-

Memories of guilt-free eating

Whatever became of hot fudge sundaes and bags of doughnuts?

IT'S THE SADDEST THING ON EARTH TO ADMIT you can't eat anymore.

The end of my youth has served formal notice. It's the mother of all turning points. Big-time loss. Big-time transition. I mourn.

Forget high culture. Forget nouvelle, forget five-star. I mean simple, regular eating. What is purer, more primal, more sensuous, more unilaterally endorsed? We eat, therefore we live.

So it is tragic to arrive at the moment of adulthood when I need only look in the direction of delicious food for it to leap into my mouth and lodge in great lumps at strategic places under my skin. There it bulges buoyantly, while I claw through the closet, breathing hard, for the Liz Claiborne tent dress that looks like a choirboy's cassock.

I work out like an Olympian, and what faces me in the mirror is a very tired Amazon. It's no secret, but when it happens to you, it's

news. After a certain point, you wear what you eat.

Once, this wasn't so. Once, the chemistry of eating was hot and clean. Bodies metabolized whatever we put in, fast. We could pack it away—and it was wholesome, charming, a signal of health and vigor; the world smiled warmly on us while we ate with abandon. I looked and felt terrific. It was safe, it was fun, it was friendly. Like war bonds and milkmen and dogs named Spot.

Return with me now to the early years: two adorable little girls stuffing grapes in their cheeks until they were grossly distended, trying to make each other laugh. In those dreamy postwar days you finished what was on your plate to "earn" dessert. Then Sis and I became gourmet chefs stirring melted ice cream soup, requiring many tastings. A thousand Oreos were dunked in milk until they crumbled into the cup; we slurped up the mess happily. Burg-

ers, malts, and candy were definitive food groups. Our eyes shone; our skin was smooth and clear.

College meant bowls of granola, huge fudge sundaes; gigantic greaseburgers, ghastly quantities of liquor and drugs. We put it in our mouths first, and asked what it was later. Next morning we sprang forth shiny as new pennies. Burrito for breakfast? Hey, thanks, man.

On to cocktail-waitressing days, when I swam all afternoon, rode my 10-speed bike across town to the bar, slung the suds till 3 a.m., toasted my colleagues good night with a Black Russian, and pedaled home under the early morning stars, stopping for a bag of doughnuts and a quart of milk at the 7-Eleven. I was *en forme*.

Today, to fit that *forme* into its clothes and sprint it upstairs without sobbing for breath, I may enjoy one modest meal per day. The rest of the time I must sublimate, sloshing down herb teas and chomping sugarless gum. When I slip, and start building mountains on my salad bar tray that make checkout clerks' eyebrows waggle, I know it is time to chant my mantra: Resist, sublimate, and, failing all else, build in antidotes. These

teer staff at a food pantry, says Sanders.

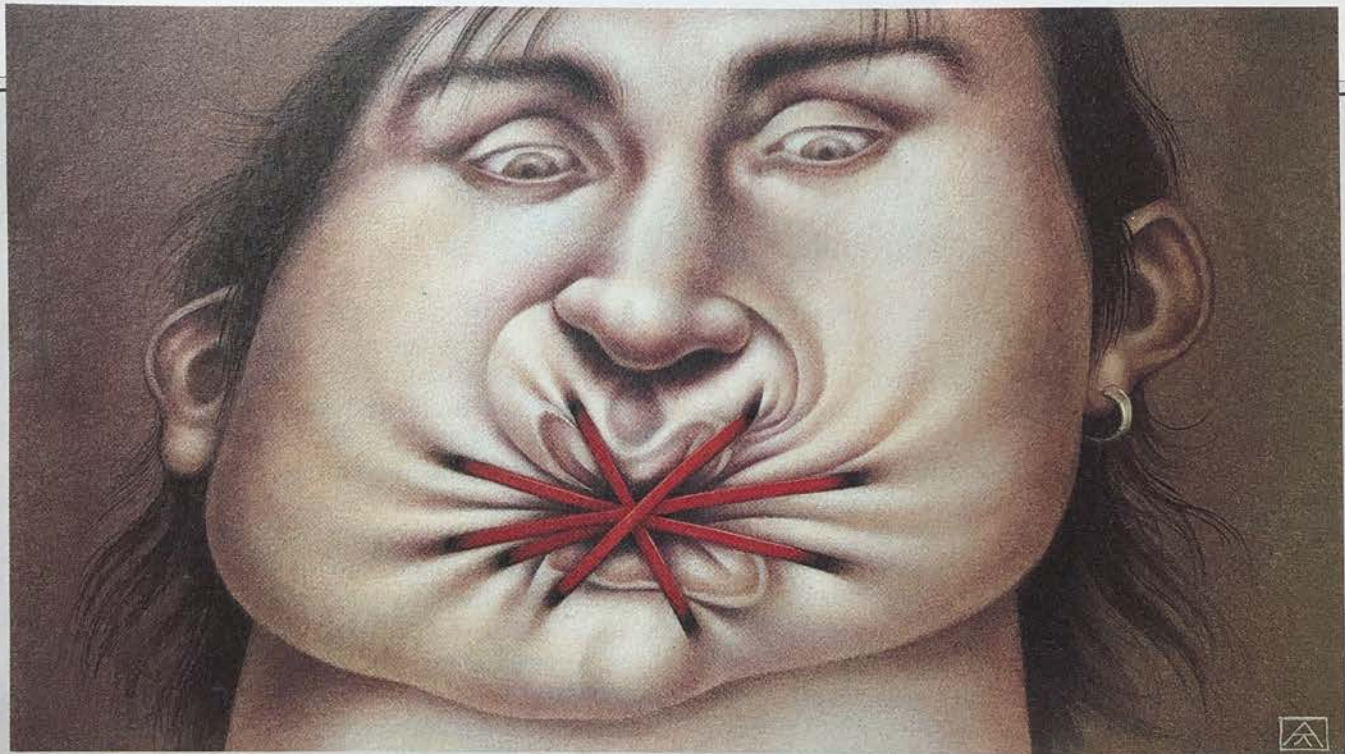
He and other advocates say that hunger cannot be eliminated unless policymakers reappraise the nation's current food-assistance system, which simply doesn't work anymore.

"When we see people on food stamps now we can almost assume they are in trouble," Colgan says. That wouldn't have been true as few as 12 years ago. Worse news is that only 52 percent of the people whose income makes them eligible for food stamps are receiving them. Community outreach used to be part of the food-stamp program, but it was cut during the 1980s. As a result, many of the working poor assume they are ineligible without getting the facts.

Colgan argues that it isn't logical for the country to allow its citizens to impoverish themselves in response to what may be a short-term economic crisis. Sanders offers a concrete example: A family that owns an automobile

valued at more than \$4,800 (a figure that has not been adjusted since the mid-1970s) cannot get food stamps. "A guy working in a steel mill gets laid off. If he has a car worth more than \$4,800, he has to sell it and use that money before he can get food stamps, but by selling that vehicle he entraps himself in a cycle of poverty; it makes it more difficult for him to find work again."

Eligibility for food stamps has also been reduced by the federal government's new definition of household and family. In response to difficult economic times, many families have been doubling up in dual households, but when two families live in one residence, they may be counted as a single household unless they can prove that they purchase and prepare food separately. The total household income may be used to determine eligibility for food stamps. That means if one family has an adequate income, the other



ANITA KUNZ

code words address each phase of the compulsion. If one is plucky, one makes it through with maybe a few extra pieces of fruit in one's belly, instead of a quart of Häagen-Dazs.

I assure you of this: When you see one of those exquisitely thin sylphs onscreen or in magazines, draped artfully against the ship's railing or the silk sheets, a delicate glass of something pale in her slender little hand, don't kid yourself. That babe longs to grind an entire

pizza, and wash it back with a few malt liquors or a tall chocolate shake. How she sublimates may not be pretty.

Let us also grant right now that this is the nonproblem of a decadent and corrupt patriarchal, imperialist culture. Shame on us.

That said, one turns heavily back to the task, a sad Sisyphus slogging uphill, never done with it. Pushing the boulder of Moderation, steeling herself against beck-

oning sights and smells—and oxymoron television images like the nymphette in denim short shorts taking a faked hearty bite of the big fat burrito.

There: I said the F-word. For the last time, too—I swear it.

—Joan Frank
This World

Excerpted with permission from the San Francisco Chronicle magazine This World (Sept. 6, 1992).

family may not be eligible for food stamps—whether or not the families are sharing household food expenses.

Such efforts to restrict eligibility, advocates argue, are ultimately counterproductive. It's a matter of dollars and sense, Bread for the World's Howell says. She points out that chronic hunger directly contributes to the nation's increasingly expensive health-care dilemma, most obviously in low-birth-weight babies. Healthcare for fragile infants is astoundingly expensive, and those "start-up" costs only grow when children continue to be hungry and fail to thrive during their growing years. Programs like WIC and Head Start "save money in the long run," says Howell: For every dollar spent to feed a hungry mother or child, the government can save four dollars it now spends on costs related to the health problems of low-birth-weight infants and malnourished children. Hunger is also a silent contributor to education costs, and has even graver implications when long-term educational and social costs are factored in. Howell argues that students who graduate without the tools to find work and hold down a job are not going to be able to participate in a U.S. economy that must compete with a well-educated global workforce.

The good news is that the country need not wait for worst-case scenarios to evolve. The programs that can wipe out hunger are already established, says Howell. They simply need restored resources and vision.

"We don't have to start from zero. Things are in place now; it's a matter of making this a priority," says Howell. Bills like the "Every Fifth Child Act," which is currently before Congress, indicate a renewed interest in battling hunger. That act would fully fund programs like WIC and Head Start so that every eligible child could be included. [An increase of \$350 million for the WIC program was approved for 1994; the Head Start component was to be considered by Congress in the fall.]

With the right commitment, hunger could be eradicated within five years, says Colgan. While hunger is inextricably bound to unemployment, poverty, and industrial decline, it's not necessary to resolve these problems to do away with hunger.

But even a renewed effort of some magnitude would do little to counteract what George Sanders considers the greatest obstacle to his relief work—public perception of the issue as a "black problem." In 1967 Senator Robert Kennedy led a group of reporters and government officials on a tour of shanties in Cleveland, Mississippi. The trip sparked the country's aware-

ness of hunger, but may have inadvertently seared in the public's memory the image of hungry black children and a persistent association of hunger and food-entitlement programs with African-Americans.

"Hunger is easily dismissed by people [when they see it] as a certain racial group's problem, a problem with *their* culture, a problem with *their* community," says Sanders. When he pointed out that virtually half of Alabama's hungry people were white, he finally began to see some support for his work there.

Tough it's a dubious privilege, Mark Carlson shatters the stereotypes. A white 39-year-old father of five, Carlson has a college degree in fine arts. An artist's income has not been enough to make ends meet, so Carlson, who says he's a jack of all trades, is ready to do almost any work. His part-time job at a food bank in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where he lives with his wife and family, gives him first dibs on a lot

of food that may go unclaimed even at the pantry.

The family usually runs through the month's food stamps within two weeks. Carlson relies on the pantry and his knowledge of the ins and outs of other food-assistance programs to find food for the rest of the month.

"It's somewhat degrading and demeaning for me to be a provider and have an education and still have to go to something like a soup kitchen. I guess I feel my own inadequacies then," he says.

Pride is an issue for many hungry South Dakotans, says Kay Torney, operating manager of Sioux Falls' Food Service Center, who estimates that as many as 20 percent of the people in Sioux Falls who need and are eligible for food stamps are not seeking them out. Part of that resistance she blames on the inevitable isolation of Western rural living; but part of it she attributes to a stubborn loyalty to the regional folk mythology.

Torney's view is more commonsensical: "Food is a right, not a privilege," she says. "We've got some people here who say, 'How can you let so-and-so in after the trouble they were last time?' or 'They didn't even say thank you.'"

"I always say, 'I don't care if anybody ever thanks me here.' We aren't gonna play politics with food. Why should someone kiss my boots when they've been through hell?"

Excerpted with permission from the Christian social justice magazine Salt (March 1993). Subscriptions: \$18/yr. (10 issues) from 205 W. Monroe St., Chicago, IL 60606. Back issues: \$2 from same address.



JOSEPH DANIEL FIEDLER

Carp seviche and jerked squirrel

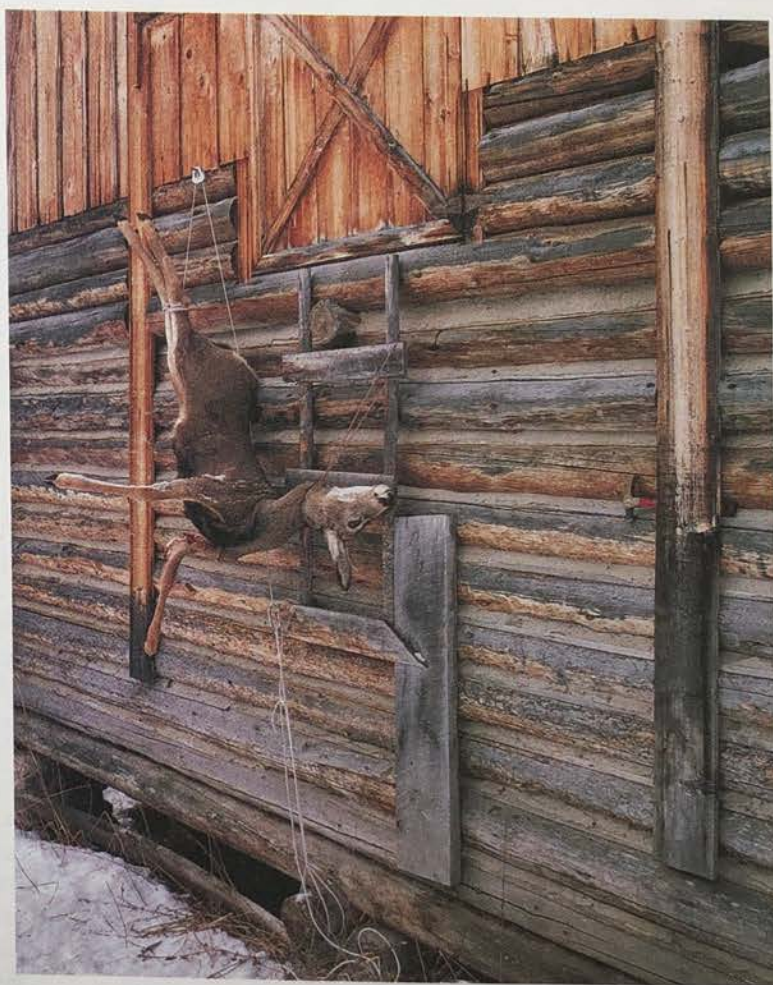
It's not always easy to dine on regional cuisine

Standing in a million acres of remote, roadless, rock-throttled, moisture-sucked, lizard-gnawed Utah desert, I think back to a recent time when I was stuck in traffic on a freeway out of Santa Barbara. I stand in intense heat on alkaline soil sprouting shrubs so sparse, thorny, scruffy, and stumpy they seem more like green bones than plants and remember the bumper sticker on the car that was ahead of me, the late-model BMW with in-dash fax and Jacuzzi. It said "I'd rather be hunting and gathering."

Californians eat by a sacred creed: fresh ingredients, procured locally, grown seasonally. "We don't shop at supermarkets anymore," they sniff, "we forage," and it's off to pluck zinfandel grapes and *fraises des bois*, to buy fetal aubergines from Buddhists, cheese direct from goats, mussels shucked by the Holy Ghost, olives cured in the spittle of Himalayan puppies. Even if the nation's food distribution system were suddenly paralyzed, forcing us to eat locally, Californians would still be *pâté-plump* and hot-tub-poached in their blessed climate. Californians may have fouled their own nest, but they will always eat better.

Every region in the world that has produced a flavorful, healthy cuisine, the foodies claim, has based that cuisine on local materials. Notice, however, that people are not rioting for cuisine de Northern Rockies, for bloody bison liver, jerked beaver, or tennis-ball tomatoes sponsored by hormones in a 32-day frost-free season. Nor do they crave what might be procured in this parched sandstone canyon where I am trying to live by the creed and prepare a meal with local resources. Compromises have been made.

We float through this canyon on a raft, packing in all food and supplies, as we do in a series of river trips during my husband's job as a ranger on Utah's Green



River. The wilderness must be left intact. It would be rather unseemly, and illegal, for a federal agent to be tilling crops or killing possibly endangered mammals for dinner. And shopping in a rural supermarket, where I supply each river trip, poses many challenges.

We shop in a town where news of a fallen Berlin wall has yet to arrive. In the seventh year of the worst drought in a century, with the local reservoir shrunk to the size of a hand mirror, the city council proposed to ban Xeriscaping as a water-conserving landscaping

method. It's an ecoterrorist plot, they warned; we lose green lawns and America will be brought to its knees. In the market checkout line, where one's patriotism is routinely tested, the few interesting items I scrounge have made me a likely candidate for exile to Bulgaria.

"Did you, like, find these *here*?" the clerk asks, holding up a pack of dried corn husks (for *tamales negros*) as if they were grasshopper puke. She empties my cart and we begin this food identification rite.

"Astroturf?" she asks.

"No, cilantro," I answer.

"Caulk?"

"Feta cheese."

Reversed, the rite becomes even more idiotic.

"Styrofoam?" I ask the clerk.

"No, Wonder bread." He is pressing the button under the counter, the one that summons the Bulgarian airline agent.

"Sheetrock? Small internal combustion engine?"

"No, Velveeta. Family Pak."

Utah is neither entirely nor the only Western state meatloafed on the steppes of culinary mediocrity. Yet, like so many others bucking the cholesterol tide, I merely want healthy, reasonably fresh, flavorful, minimally carcinogenic food. I want to eat like a Fremont.

The Fremont Indians lived in the Great Basin and Colorado Plateau from around A.D. 650 to 1250, roughly contemporary with the fabled Anasazi civilization of the Four Corners region. Archaeologists working on Utah's Fremont River first recognized the Fremont as a distinct culture and gave it the name. These seminomads used the Green River corridor, its highlands and tributaries, for hunting. When conditions were favorable, they grew squash, beans, and corn, which they stored in masonry

What would it be like to eat everything you could lay your hands on?

cists under protected ledges in the canyon walls. They pecked pictures of their gods in the desert varnish of sandstone boulders and cliffs, made baskets and pots, and gathered wild plants for culinary, medicinal, and ceremonial purposes.

In the canyon, California reverie ended, I look around at the Fremont larder. Things are not exactly as they were a thousand years ago. Cattle grazed these river bottoms for a century, selecting for certain plants, so there is a mix of native and exotic flora, a post-grazing succession also affected by erosion and drought. Nevertheless, the Fremont would have eaten rice grass, squawbush berries, the greens of fourwing saltbush or its ashes in cornmeal-based bread. They may have chewed the roots of globemallow to strengthen broken bones, washed their hair with yucca root, and painted with beeplant, cliffrose, or greasewood dyes. They used

yucca fibers for twine, cattails for mats, rabbit skins for coats. The Fremont wore the desert, they ate it.

What would it be like to eat everything you could lay your hands on? What if, standing on this sunny, juniper-sweet alluvial fan spilling into the sinuous river, I were very, very hungry? For a start, I could stuff those beetles into my mouth, nail that bunny under the greasewood bush, gnaw sugary sego lily bulbs, clobber a few great blue herons, strangle a chukar, pillage the cooler of a random boater, bag a bighorn sheep, and supplement this feast with watercress, yucca pods, and fruit of

Eating between the lines

The ephemeral, oblivious world of food mags

PLEASE. COME IN. SIT DOWN, WHY DON'T YOU? HAVE A GLASS OF CHARDON- nay. Won't be long now. Dinner's almost ready. It's always dinnertime here in the world of food magazines, except when it's the perfect moment for a beach picnic or a polo party or afternoon tea. Things are so perfectly delightful, so delicious and festive and different, except when they're delicious and homey and comforting.

This world has different neighborhoods—some young and hip, some old guard. All are upscale communities, though; living here requires a measure of affluence, leisure time, conviviality, and possession of a Cuisinart. Or in the case of *Gourmet*, a small staff of devoted servants. There are no poor or hungry in these pages, not even any housewives fighting the death grip of drudgery through "Leftovers with First-Time Appeal." While the old-style women's magazines are about food and cooking as hard facts of life—stretching tuna, obscuring green beans—these journals of cuisine (*Gourmet*, *Bon Appétit*, *Food and Wine*, *Cook's*) are about food in the abstract, completely removed from function or consequence. Exquisite raw materials are poached or gratinéed or blackened into Something with a Name, something that says Who We Are to the guests we will impress by serving these wondrous concoctions and confections in an utterly elegant situation.

This stratospheric dinner party needn't ever actually happen, of course. It can remain forever on the page, awaiting the insertion of our own best selves.

Gourmet is to food as *Vogue* is to fashion; the readers seem to be dreamers after the particular dream being presented rather than characters in it. In the You Asked for It column they write to grovel for recipes. A

the prickly pear cactus. I could go fishing. While the Fremont fished native squawfish, I would catch an infestation of exotics—carp or catfish. This eclectic ecology affects the purity of tonight's menu. We will eat like the Fremont, with adjustments. Pockets full of plump, pungent juniper berries, I return to camp.

The menu is roast lamb, the closest legal meat to a bighorn, baked with juniper sauce in a very un-Fremont-like cast-iron Dutch oven, fresh corn roasted in the husk then eaten with dashes of cumin and squeezes of lime, *posole* with black beans and *chipotle* peppers.

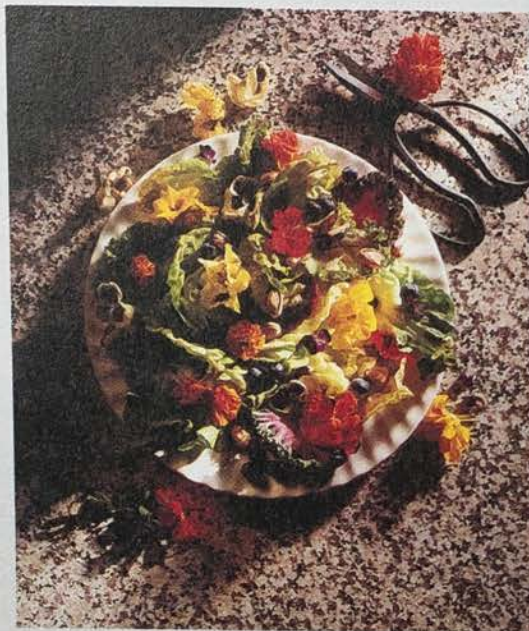
The beans simmer while the grill awaits the corn. The roast bakes under a crown of bright cottonwood embers, double-stacked with a second Dutch oven of peach pie. We pop the wine cork, turn the gnats and mosquitoes over to the bats, and watch this gorgeous river flow by. Is this living by the creed?

The gourmet fetishism of the 1980s turned us into food snobs. There is nothing new about this condition—diet has a centuries-long relation to class and status—except its irony. Organ meats, edible flowers, blood sausage, and the like, once the fare of the poor,

typical query: "My husband and I had the opportunity to dine at Aujourd'hui in the Four Seasons Hotel, Boston. The meal was a sumptuous delight, but the dessert was simply unforgettable. Would it be possible to obtain the recipe for the blackberry soufflé? We haven't stopped talking about it since we first tasted it."

In the aggregate, these readers seem like shallow-breathing characters out of an Anne Tyler novel: For them, eating is an admissible form of sensuality, and travel a languid, aimless movement to faraway destinations in clean countries (or swept corners of dirty countries), where they can arrive with engraved itineraries and preconceived notions that these places will try not to rumple. Once there, they'll be served some exquisitely prepared dish that will take possession of all their further conversations.

Although other, hipper food magazines such as *Bon Appétit* and *Cook's* have the feel of working journals—sleeves rolled up, carbon steel knives sharpened, and garlic sizzling in the background—they're still a little queasy-making in their cumulative unglobal view: Eating is something nice that happens in your mouth, something stylish that happens on your fork. Serious, unironic attention is given to items signaling civilization's progress: edible flowers, gold-leaf wrappers for sushi, spring-water ice cubes, birthday cake germ guards. It's easy, while wandering amid the celery-aquavit palate cleansers and nasturtium salads or debating the merits of peach-wood grilling versus mesquite, to forget that for most of human history, cuisine amounted to making sure dinner was both dead and not likely to kill you. And one can lose sight of the fact that most of the diners on this globe are currently between bowls of rice and would have some trouble understanding the concept of *bon appétit*.



The world of food magazines is a social one. The recipes and meals by and large are meant to be cooked with or for friends, offerings to share with company. This is a notion in the longest and widest cross-cultural tradition of food. Of our two great creature pleasures, eating is the one we do in groups as opposed to pairs. Even in the poorest cultures, cooking and eating have always been a way of gathering together, taking respite from work, celebrating. And certainly many of everyone's most deeply pleasurable experiences have revolved around wonderful

meals, or meals in wonderful company.

Why, then, although speaking to something so central, do these magazines so often seem ephemeral? Partly, I think, it's that they're caught in the journalistic squeeze of always having to ask "What's new and exciting?" When the subject is food, too often the answer is either an honest "not much really" or a rapidly whipped up "Why, quinoa salad with scallop and mango butterflies, of course." A lot of this frenzy for the new, for the shock of the shiitake, is a response to readers seeking status through the appetizers they serve, making stylistic statements through the restaurants they're seen at. Cooking in and dining out have become central clauses in the idiom of affluence, weird attenuations of the plain traditions from which they spring.

—Carol Anshaw

Village Voice Literary Supplement

Excerpted with permission from the Village Voice Literary Supplement (Dec. 1989). Subscriptions: \$14.95/yr. (10 issues) from Box 3000, Dept. VLS, Denville, NJ 07834. Back issues: \$5 from 36 Cooper Sq., New York, NY 10003.

Food taboos

Is anything off limits anymore?

IT USED TO BE THAT WE KNEW WHO WE WERE BY the foods we refused to eat, and perhaps some species memory is behind the vehemence with which infants assert their autonomy by flinging dinner across the room, the righteousness with which every sentient American child goes through a phase of vegetarianism.

For centuries, Orthodox Jews and Muslims haven't eaten pork. Christians traditionally did eat pork but didn't eat meat on Friday. Upper-caste Hindus and some Buddhists ate no meat, especially not beef. Jains didn't eat anything that had ever possessed a living soul, a category that for some reason included onions and garlic. It may be that food taboos affirm a covenant with God, but they also affirm a covenant with like-minded people and (perhaps most importantly) an essential, unbridgeable distance from the food tastes of the Other.

The Other blithely and greedily consumes what we know is unclean and would like nothing better than to defile us by making us eat it, too. During the early, horrific wars between Indian Sikhs and Muslims, Sikhs were said to ritually wash down mosques with the blood of freshly slaughtered pigs. During the Inquisition, secretly practicing Marrano Jews who pretended to have converted were tested by being forced to eat pork; and it seems, sadly, that the fantastic medieval

idea that Jews bake Passover matzos with the blood of Christian children is, even now, not quite so safely dead as one might reasonably suppose. All of us have heard gossip about the wily Asian restaurateur who kidnaps dear Fido and Mittens and tricks us into ordering and eating our darlings, served sweet and sour.

Much of this, of course, is flat-out racism, but one also detects a milder note of unease in our best efforts to understand the spectrum of multicultural dietary diversity—to defend the right of people to eat, if they wish, their dogs, their cats, their monkeys, and even their dead.

One needn't be an anthropologist to make the obvious associations between food taboos and taboos about the body and sex—specifically about relations with the Other who dines on the forbidden and assimilates the unclean flesh into his or her own body. Our ideas about the Other's diet are allied with ideas of exotic sex, with the sexual prowess (or lack of it) of some untrustworthy group or race or tribe. Americans are curious about and (in the case of environmentalists) enraged by the Chinese belief in the aphrodisiacal properties of various powdered horns and tusks.

Indulging in a taboo food, forbidden since early childhood, can be at once sickening and erotic.

Gandhi's autobiography contains a fascinating and highly charged description of how he once broke his vow never to eat beef. He repented with a bout of illness and a renewed commitment to activist vegetarianism.

Today, if we tolerate food superstitions at all, we insist they be benevolent: We like hearing about the good-luck dishes various ethnic groups cook on New Year's Day.

We do know that there are otherwise apparently sensible Muslims and Jews who *still* atavistically persist in not eating pork, Hindu friends we would never invite for a steak dinner. But most of us in the "rational" West consider ourselves light-years beyond all that.

Though, naturally, there are limits.

A dinner party guest announced that he knew a Venezuelan artist who for a mere four hundred dollars could arrange to have a cube of fresh human flesh shipped, on ice, from Caracas to Manhattan. He waited. There were no takers. Was it the expense? Wasn't it interesting that no one wanted to try it? he asked, and he said that the desire to partake of human flesh is the only human desire that civilization has ever successfully eradicated.

But civilization (so-called) has apparently been more widely successful in eradicating other food taboos. Aside from obvious exceptions like the ban on cannibalism, we have (or we flatter ourselves that we have) evolved beyond the forbidden. We no longer really need diet to affirm our group identity or

now sizzle the palates of the affluent, who scorn cheap mainstream baloney, irradiated fruit, Dweemo, Spam, pink sugar, and other processed foods containing the oil-based flavors we fought Iraq for. To irony, add the illusion that we can live off the land, eat food close to the source. Not too many people remember what the source is. Not much of either the source or the land is left. Imagine everyone in Newark foraging. Imagine yourself wringing the necks of chickens or grappling with

bleeding, bleating goats.

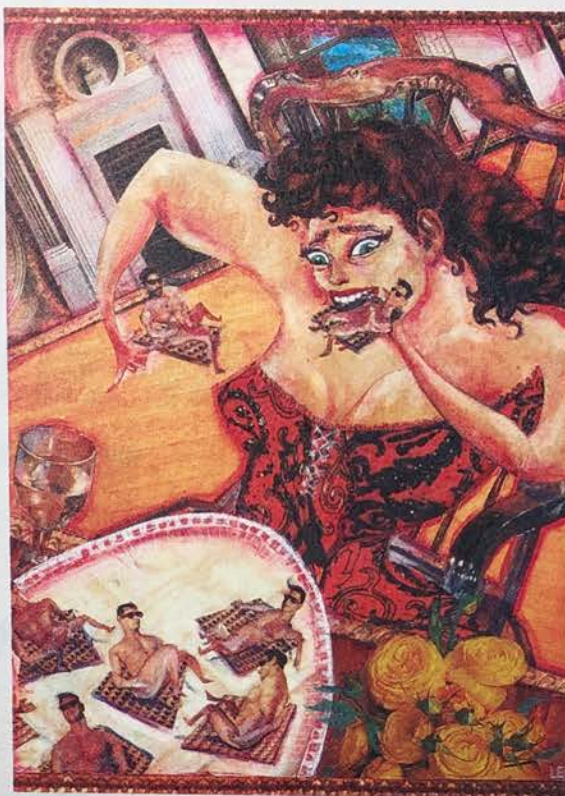
Behind the excesses, the foodies launched an awareness of food politics and the relation between diet—what we eat, how it is grown, the resources consumed to produce it—and planetary health. A diet less dependent on the mass-food apparatus also may require an apocalyptic eradication of food taboos. To pull us back from the ecocidal brink, writes Calvin Schwabe in *Unmentionable Cuisine*, we must put more

to encourage us to despise those whose diets are different from our own—we have so many neater ways to set ourselves apart (nationalism, for example), careful methods of differentiation that don't muck about in those fuzzy gray areas involving individual food preferences and unclean forms of animal life.

No longer deemed politically or spiritually necessary and, finally, just an inconvenience, the Catholic Church's ban on eating meat on Fridays has been lifted during my lifetime. Few of my friends are (in any traditional sense) religious, and I know few Jews of my generation who, were it not for the taboo on cholesterol, wouldn't happily and guiltlessly dine daily on prosciutto and Canadian bacon (though I know there are many who would not).

If taboos no longer speak to our spiritual lives, they do still address issues of longevity and health. Perhaps now that we no longer believe in God or in an afterlife, now that we no longer expect the strict observation of dietary restrictions to assure us a berth in heaven, we must endeavor to do the next best thing—that is, live forever.

It's too drearily familiar to track the changing fortunes of various foods that have lost their reputation as elixirs and been identified as poisons. Many of us hope wanly for the day when butter, cream, and cheese will be discovered to be better for us than their



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pale, ascetic low-fat equivalents.

It's no secret that patterns of dietary attraction and avoidance bear a skewed and often ironic relation to privilege and social class: In the 1980s a generation discovered that one of the perks of new money was being able to pay astronomical prices for comfy, uninspired "home" cooking like meat loaf and mashed potatoes. One of the luxuries of class is that we can afford to make exquisite nutritional, aesthetic, and culinary distinctions—or, perversely and conversely, dispense with them altogether. The rich and the stylish often take a certain pride in being catholic in

their food tastes—the earliest to "discover" this or that peculiar ingredient, the first to value the cuisine of some remote and starving province.

The rich, who flatter themselves that nothing humanly edible is foreign to them, do draw the line at the pitiful, unesthetic, unsavory food of the poor: the white bread, the processed spreads, the rat-tail-pink luncheon meat, and the sugary, carnival-colored cereals. Gourmets who would happily dine on monkey brains and Venezuelan human cube steak flee in horror from the prospect of a white-bread-and-baloney sandwich.

Some will say this is personal taste, but it is a form of social taboo, or perhaps it is a social taboo masquerading as personal taste. Indeed, the food taboo is very much alive and well, and has only gone into hiding under the shiny sheets of Velveeta, in the airy puff of Wonder bread, and in the rare pork bleeding onto our plates.

—Francine Prose
Antaeus

Excerpted from "Cocktail Hour at the Snake Blood Bar: On the Persistence of Taboo" by Francine Prose. Copyright © 1992 by Francine Prose. First appeared in the literary quarterly Antaeus (Spring 1992). Subscriptions: \$30/yr. (4 issues) from Ecco Press, 100 W. Broad St., Hopewell, NJ 08525. Back issues: \$15 from same address.

snake, songbird, reptile, roadkill, rodent, dog, cat, tongue, brain, and gonad—fresh ingredients, locally procured—on our plates.

It may not be possible to eat like a Fremont, but their adaptability, resourcefulness, and intimate knowledge of this desert environment are instructive. Since this is our home, we should toss aside our own culture's petronuclear cheez taboos and start eating. Carp sevicehe. Jerked squirrel. Tanagers *en croûte*. Greasewood tacos.

Bunnies in aspic. Lopped-off haunch of feral cow. Eat your pets!

Excerpted with permission from the Rocky Mountain regional quarterly Northern Lights (Winter 1993). Subscriptions: \$25/yr. (4 issues) from Northern Lights Institute, Box 8084, Missoula, MT 59807-8084. Back issues: \$5 from same address. Ellen Meloy's book about the Green River will be published by Henry Holt and Company in 1994.