

We recall a well-attended public screening of Trinh T. Minh-Ha's film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* sponsored by the cultural studies program at a private university. The discussion afterward centered on the content and stylistic choices made to problematize the "objectivity" of the camera I-eye. During the discussion, both faculty and the undergraduate majors came across as being well versed in current theories on the politics of representation, especially of the Other. However, one of the faculty, in the process of praising the high level of self-reflexivity achieved in the film and its attempt to disrupt dominant racial/ethnic stereotyping, referred to one of the individuals portrayed in the film as "the woman who kept shoveling rice into her mouth," a reference at which audience members laughed. This has always seemed to us a telling instance of how deeply embedded cultural notions of normative eating are. Looking back, we recall that this is the same faculty member who attributed her "student-centered" teaching style to what she termed "Paulo Freire's problem-solving" pedagogy. The slip from "problem-posing" to "problem-solving," like the readily available image of "rice-shoveling Asians," illustrates the danger of resorting to one's fluency in the vocabulary of mainstream U.S. English. In spite of our often sincere desires, intentions, and resolutions to combat all forms of discrimination, automatic privileging of "idiomatic expressions" and "eloquence" can trap us in the mire of the very systems we self-consciously try to deconstruct.

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## Books That Cook: Teaching Food and Food Literature in the English Classroom

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### SHARING RECIPES

**T**he literatures of food are as multiple as the cuisines they include. Menu poems. Cookbook memoirs. Novels in recipes. Foodie films. Gift books of quotable cooks. Over the past decade, the two of us have collected, read, and made selections from this myriad of food literatures to develop parallel "Books That Cook" courses at our two institutions: Saint Joseph's University, a Jesuit university in Philadelphia, and St. Mary's College of Maryland, a public liberal arts college on the St. Mary's River. Although the content of our courses differs—Melissa's offers more poetry and nonfiction prose, Jennifer's more fiction and film—the similarities are clear: we teach many of the same books (*Like Water for Chocolate*, *Heartburn*, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, and selections from *We Are What We Ate*); offer both as upper-level, writing-intensive courses in English departments; and require a certain amount of cookery on the part of our students.

We've found another significant yet unexpected parallel: in talking about Books That Cook with our colleagues, we have often received what we've come to call the "arched-eyebrow response." While there is no dictionary to define it, the connota-

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tion of the arched eyebrow is “You English folk will teach anything and call it literature.” We have discovered that there is an inherent distrust of a class in which food is taken seriously—read, discussed, written about, cooked, and consumed. The carnivalesque comes to mind, as well as the notion of education packaged and sold as “entertainment.” Our colleagues ask us how a college-level course on glorified cookbooks could have rigor or method or “meat.” (One commented, “No offense, but your Books That Cook class shouldn’t count as a 2000-level course,” while another remarked, “Your book list looks like beach reading.”) And then there’s the assumption that a teacher who feeds her students is only looking for high evaluation marks at the end of the term.

In light of this skepticism, we have asked ourselves our own probing questions. Why teach the literatures of food in the first place? Why grapple with such a range of genres, which makes our courses difficult to categorize? Why have students write their own food literatures as part of the class? Why compel students to cook?

Our answers to these questions are as complex as the food literatures we teach. To teach food as a written art form is to teach a part of what it means to be human. Through the record of food traditions, culture and history are transmitted as well as transformed—practices of sharing, preparing, and eating recipes both create and convey human interactions. Moreover, like humanity, food is both elastic and contradictory. It symbolizes birth, rebirth, and death. It represents the natural as well as the artificial. It can mean both health and poison, war and peace, surfeit and hunger, art and commodity. In other words, food texts are multifaceted in terms of their content, and yet they’re also complex in terms of genre, tone, and approach—thereby mirroring the intricacies of writers and readers. Thus, our common goal in developing Books That Cook has been to help students connect their writing and learning to the multiplicities of their own personal food literacies, even as they turn outward to consider practices of creation and consumption in the texts we read as well as in larger communities and across the globe.

Inevitably, then, these connections created and experienced in Books That Cook are rooted in collaboration, a give-and-take we seek to mirror in this article. In the sections that follow, we take turns writing more specifically about the genesis of our parallel courses, classroom discussions we’ve had and student writing we’ve seen, and, ultimately, we circle back around to re-consider the question of the worthiness of food literature in the English classroom—this time with an eye to how our respective classes are currently opening out to cover new territories (or, perhaps, “tables”), including a section focused on food and the environment. This conversational approach—one that listens to Jennifer’s voice before switching to pay attention to Melissa’s—both echoes and furthers the real-life conversations about the literatures of food that the two of us have had with each other over many a meal, numerous pots of tea, and more than a few bottles of wine. We hope that this inter-

action will encourage readers to reflect on their own practices of preparation, consumption, and sharing—whether in the realms of reading, writing, teaching, or eating.

#### GATHERING INGREDIENTS: JENNIFER

Books That Cook began in friendship—a friendship between Melissa and me nurtured by conversations over coffee, shared meals, potlucks, and menu planning, as well as by an exchange of recipes and book recommendations. When Melissa first shared with me her love of food literature and told me that her “dream course” was one in which all of the books would include recipes, I immediately thought of Nora Ephron’s *Heartburn*, which includes a perfect recipe for mashed potatoes.

Years earlier, the beginning of my own interest in food fiction had come from a rummage-bin purchase of Ephron’s novel, one that already felt friendly in my hand, given that I believed her *When Harry Met Sally* was one of the world’s perfect movies. As I laughed out loud at the quirky, New York wit, I came to the middle of the novel where the narrator, Rachel Samstat, pauses to offer a section entitled “Potatoes and Love: Some Reflections.” Here, Samstat likens each stage of a relationship to the kind of potatoes one is willing to make for a lover. One begins with either Swiss potatoes or potatoes Anna—tetchy, time-consuming, delicious recipes that one wouldn’t make, claims Samstat, unless one was truly in love. The middle of a relationship is when potatoes stop and pasta takes over—when it’s easier to boil water and toss in a box of spaghetti than it is to fuss over potatoes. And the end occurs when one wants nothing but mashed potatoes. “In the end,” Samstat admits, “I always want potatoes. [. . .] Nothing like mashed potatoes when you’re feeling blue. Nothing like getting into bed with a bowl of hot mashed potatoes already loaded with butter, and methodically adding a thin cold slice of butter to every forkful” (126).

I had never read food fiction before, and so I was struck by Ephron’s decision to include bona fide recipes for these three potato dishes, to concretize her narrator’s controlling metaphor of various potatoes as the various stages of an affair. What better device to create a full, complex character than to have me cook and consume these dishes, thereby “em-bodying” the fictional Rachel Samstat? Here I stopped reading, went to the store, and came home to cook up Swiss potatoes, potatoes Anna, and mashed potatoes. And somewhere in the midst of all that peeling, grating, roasting, frying, mashing, and eating, I *became* Rachel Samstat. I tasted the crispy, hot thrill of her first infatuation as well as the lukewarm, mashed mourning of her subsequent pain. Such connection, such readerly transformation from fiction to fact seemed magical—even mystical.

From then on I sought recipe novels, and my finds, coupled with Melissa's knowledge of food memoirs, grew into my own reading list for Books That Cook. In addition to *Heartburn*, I included one "classic" novel, *The Age of Innocence*, as well as trade paperbacks *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and *Chocolat*, and the lesser-known novels *The Debt to Pleasure*, *The Food Taster*, *Keeping House*, *Secrets of the Tsil Café*, and *The Priest Fainted*. A colleague of mine, Lucille Clifton, steered me to the memoir-cookbook-travelogue *Vibration Cooking*. Another foodie suggested *We Are What We Ate*, a collection of recipe essays by well-known writers. And I was already partial to *Big Night* and *Eat Drink Man Woman*, films that weave intrigue, love, and family farce with sensual scenes of cooking and eating.

Yet a reading list does not make a course. How could I get at the complexities embedded in these disparate food literatures? In my classroom, I decided, we would ask how these texts create their narrators, express meaning through the language of food, and thereby remake their reader-eaters. From the rhetorical, we would discern the cultural.

On the first day of class, I sought to establish this pedagogical approach by beginning with a multi-faceted exercise based on a dessert I was sure everyone in the class would know: strawberry shortcake. My students and I started by brainstorming associations Americans have with this dessert. We covered everything from the doll to the Fourth of July to Mom's down-home cooking to the Dolly Madison cheats in grocery-store produce sections. Setting these subjects aside, we then looked at recipes for strawberry shortcake from three classic cookbooks: Fanny Farmer (1896), *The Joy of Cooking* (1931), and Betty Crocker (1950). Reading chronologically, students saw that cookbook language and form have changed over time. Once chatty and confessional, cookbooks became increasingly more technical and scientific. They evolved from a storytelling, "feminine" voice (prosy, anecdotal) into a how-to, "masculine" one (ingredients, directions, quantities).

From here, we examined 1990s shortcakes from Emeril Lagasse and Jamie Oliver. Students noted how both these chefs combine the feminine with the masculine. Sometimes they use a domestic, confessional voice; other times, they assert their authority as "master chefs" (never "cooks") in their precision, knowledge, and haute cuisine twists on the old favorite (Emeril's "New Orleans Chocolate Strawberry Shortcake").

When asked to connect these five recipes back to our initial associations, students understood that a real-world foodstuff like strawberry shortcake has diverse and contradictory associations. It can express traditional femininity (Mom or the Betty Crocker housewife) or highbrow masculinity (Oliver's "Short Crust Strawberry Pastries"). The dish represents itself as traditional and homemade (Farmer, *Joy*), but its success relies on artificiality and advertising (the children's toy, Dolly

Madison). Strawberry shortcake also symbolizes car-commercial nationhood (white, middle-class, Fourth-of-July America), but it originated in a Native American recipe. The first Anglo invaders appropriated the indigenous method of baking crushed strawberries with cornmeal by crossing it with the British scone, once called a "short cake." As a cultural symbol, then, strawberry shortcake is not just strawberry shortcake.

As the finale to this first class, we concluded by reading a children's book, *Cook-a-Doodle-Do*, which is based around a recipe for (what else) strawberry shortcake. Once we'd read the book out loud, I brought out an actual shortcake mirroring the one on the book's front cover. But rather than simply serve it and bid the students farewell, I asked them to consider how "eating the book" transforms the experience of reading a story. We'd spent an entire class talking about language and form in cookbooks. Now I wanted them to talk about readers.

Their ideas were compelling and complex. If readers cook and consume a recipe from a story, the story moves beyond the sense of sight. It is now tasted, smelled, touched, even heard. The story takes up actual space. Whereas a book's pages are 2-D, food is 3-D; the story now has weight, texture, shadow, depth. Fantasy becomes reality. Identification becomes performance. Mind becomes body. And the story is ingested, incorporated into the reader at the cellular level. The story literally comes alive.

This idea that a text can come alive became a way to ground and structure the work I did then—and that I continue to do—with my version of Books That Cook. It has enabled me and my students to consider the power of our own writing: the ways in which writing can alter the sum and substance of readers. And it has pushed us to go beyond a one-to-one correlation between a foodstuff and a character or a meal and a plot device to delve into the "reality"—the "matter" in both senses of the word—that paradoxically comes about when reading or writing food literature.

#### COOKING THE BOOKS: MELISSA

Before I taught Books That Cook for the first time, I cooked all summer, watching, as Jennifer mentions above, the texts I was reading and re-reading "come alive." That May, as I was reading Judith Moore's memoir *Never Eat Your Heart Out*, I set out the sugar, flour, salt, cinnamon, rhubarb—fresh from a friend's garden—strawberries, lemon, vanilla extract, butter, and milk. I rummaged for teaspoons, knives, a wooden spoon, measuring cups, mixing bowls, and the buried pie plate, and as I rolled out the dough, I thought about Moore's reflections on strawberry rhubarb pie, how she observes that it—like the body—"offers itself for reverie on the enigma of inside and out" (3). She writes of the "transformation that is almost sorcery" that

begins once the pie is placed in the heated oven, and she closes her opening chapter with a description of “[t]he fruits’ sweet and buttery juices, in a total immersion baptism of the mouth, flood[ing] tongue, teeth, cheeks” (13).

Rhubarb season blended into basil, and pesto took over the kitchen. The season for grilled asparagus was too short. I wanted June back, but July brought its strawberries and blueberries. By the time I’d chosen nearly all the texts—Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*, Ephron’s *Heartburn*, Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate*, Colwin’s *Home Cooking*, Tisdale’s *The Best Thing I Ever Tasted*, a thick packet of poems and articles, and the film version of *Babette’s Feast*—I was buried under August’s abundance of tomatoes. There were buckets and baskets everywhere, huge bowls of salsa.

On the last day of summer break, the night before classes began, my fingers were stained tomato red. I’d been chopping, dicing, squeezing all month with no recipe. Tomatoes, cilantro, jalapeño, onion, salt, cumin, cayenne, and lime—more lime. These bowls, the last before the season of apples, were gifts for my students. We shared the salsa with store-bought chips as I introduced myself and the syllabus through the ritual of food. On this first day of class, one student noted how once the food came out, the previously silent and cautious students began talking and sharing with an openness and candor unprecedented so early in the semester.

For the second class, the students introduced themselves to each other through the same ritual, having written a short essay on some recipe important in their own family: Cannoli Cake, Pineapple Upside-down Cake, Old Fashioned Pumpkin Pie, Hazelton Cheerio Pop, Tamales De Abuela. The student who shared her abuela’s tamales told the story of her grandmother coming to America from Havana, Cuba, in 1967. She spoke of the contrast between her mother’s kitchen and grandmother’s, and how she herself had grown up eating Cap’n Crunch, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, meatloaf, and mashed potatoes. This student, however, wrote little of the Cap’n Crunch of her youth; instead, she wrote about black beans and rice, arroz con pollo topped with roasted peppers, avocado drizzled in oil and vinegar. She wrote of fried plantains.

When the students shared their essays and the food they’d brought to go along with their writing, I realized how diverse our white on the surface—powdered-sugar-coated—group of students really was. How a student who grew up on Cap’n Crunch could be half Cuban and feel so connected to that culture, even as she loved Chaucer, Bronte, Orwell, and Thoreau and hated *Heartburn*. How another student believed until she was six years old that women were not allowed to eat meat because her mother and aunts never did. She told of having dinner at a friend’s house and seeing her friend’s mother take a bite of steak. She exclaimed, “You can’t do that!” Many spoke of immigrant grandparents or shared recipes created out of necessity in the Depression (recipes bizarre in their mix of corn, beans, and tuna). Another told of

her family’s blueberry farm, how it defined her, how her family in the abundant summer months created recipes. She brought in blueberry pizza, following a recipe created by her aunt.

In this early assignment, students began to recognize and articulate cultural experience, especially cultural difference. We carried this awareness over into our discussion of the books we read. Often, students liked both what they ate and what they read if they could identify with it: if the ingredients were familiar and blended in familiar combinations. Yet through discussing the books, we saw not only how authors define characters by what they eat but also how writers use food to create and signal change in relationships.

For example, in reading *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, we discussed how the narrator uses food to define and demonstrate change in the character of Evelyn Couch. In the first several chapters of the novel, Evelyn is defined through her relationship to junk food—lists of candy bars and other mass-produced products. She’s figured as an isolated character whose practices of consumption (both her ways of eating and of interacting—in her case passively listening to Mrs. Threadgood) are cut off from others. Once she becomes more involved in Mrs. Threadgood’s life and story—once the women become friends—Evelyn not only shares her food but also slowly begins to change her eating habits. She goes from sharing store-bought Cracker Jacks to cooking a time-consuming homemade meal for Mrs. Threadgood of southern-style greens, buttermilk biscuits, fried chicken, and fried green tomatoes.

I watched a similar transformation take place in my students and saw that “tastes”—both literary and sensory—change in the context of relationship: from the student who confronted her own biases about contemporary novels written by women to students who paused long before tasting the food prepared by classmates (questioning ingredients from jalapeños to artichokes; I admit my own questioning, too, due to a fear of mayonnaise, especially after it had been carried around in a backpack all afternoon). I witnessed other transformations as well. One student described her process of what she called moving forward instead of looking backward. She said she’d often leave class missing her Italian mother, who used to cook for her daily. This student would go back to her apartment and comfort herself with boxed mac-and-cheese until she realized she could build on the foundation her mother and grandmother had provided and could cook with friends and roommates, using the kitchen table to eat on for the first time. Another student, a food marketing major, nearly dropped the course when she learned it was a workshop class with an intensive focus on student writing. She felt separated from the other students, mostly English majors, and didn’t want them reading her work. Yet she was surprised at the end of the semester to have learned quite a bit about writing and to have made friends outside of the business school.



These experiences and others reminded me that through attention, listening, discussion, and the willingness to suspend judgment, a genre, dish, or person that is at first unfamiliar at best, turn-your-nose-up at worst, can be appreciated and, in some cases, understood.

#### WONDERING IF THE FOOD IS ANY GOOD: JENNIFER

Having now taught *Books That Cook* two or three times over the past six years, Melissa and I have had conversations that move from *what* we're teaching (the reading list for our courses is ever in flux, given the popularity of food literature and people's eagerness to give us suggestions) to *why* we're teaching what we're teaching. Back to that arched-eyebrow response: my colleagues (and even a few skeptical students) have asked me if the writing that we do in *Books That Cook* is "really any good." I believe this query is a result of two assumptions: first, that writing about, say, the culinary ability of an Old World Italian mother is going to make for sappy prose, and, second, that the genre just isn't something to take seriously. It's no surprise that the literatures of food are feminized, and even the reading lists for our courses make that plain. For every bon vivant novel written by a man about "masculine" food topics (food tasting, Epicureanism, poisoning), there are ten written by women about a main character who is finding her maternal roots or trying to relocate herself through cooking at the same time that the way to the inevitable love interest's heart is clearly through that old esophageal path. More specifically, much food literature is not only feminized but is also relentlessly middle class and heterosexual: it is often a romance novel (*The Last Chinese Chef*) or a "find yourself" memoir (*Under the Tuscan Sun*) that just happens to include recipes.

That said, my colleagues are surprised when I note how many books "turn the tables" on food-writing clichés—including readerly expectations of fiction or memoir by women. Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* is a delightful, exaggerated spoof on all fairytales, whereas Sharon Harris's *Chocolat* mounts a serious critique of the Catholic Church that the movie version expunged. In book form, *Fried Green Tomatoes* is a lesbian love story as well as a novel that takes on both race relations in the segregated South of the 1930s and 40s as well as the 1980s cultural backlash against feminism; *Heartburn* is an acerbic comment on popular writers in general, especially reporters and "food personalities" who crank out cookbooks in-between taping segments for the Food Network; and Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor's *Vibration Cooking* is a social history of African American politics, music, customs, and foodways during the civil rights era.

This breadth of engagement is mirrored in student writing. Over the course of the term, my students write a recipe, a dish history (a summary of the linguistic etymology and cultural history of a specific dish), a recipe recollection (a personal

food essay), a critical paper (an analysis of one of the texts we're studying), and a final fictional or creative nonfictional piece for our collaborative literary cookbook (the most recent of which may be downloaded on [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com) under the title "Gut Feelings"). This breadth of assignments encourages students to view the transformation of food into language through a number of lenses and to try out a variety of writerly approaches.

Among these assignments, perhaps my favorite is the Recipe Recollection, in which students trace part of the collective memory of their own families by doing research on, and then writing about, the personal and social history of a recipe. My student's Recollections go beyond writing about food to asking a reader to re-experience food as a metaphor but also, always, as an experience in the reader's own memory, located in the mind as well as the body. These essays require that readers re-taste, re-feel, and re-see individual and collective memory.

For instance, some of the students critiqued the ways in which certain cuisines embodied certain identities. In one essay, Eli Park-Yanovitch explains that how humans define themselves as cultured or uncultured has something to do with how food defines the human: "A combination of a desire for 'class' and pecuniary deficiency has made my family masters of thrift-food shopping. We make rich marinara sauces out of 89 cent cans of whole, peeled tomatoes and leftover red wine, alfredo sauces by pouring heavy cream, butter and pepper over hot fettuccini noodles and tossing until thick." In turn, Maggie Stubbs challenges distinctions between high and low culture with her defense of instant mashed potatoes: "I don't think that I'm not cultured; I think that I was raised in a different culture. Not one slightly solidified-thick-lukewarm spoonful of instant mashed potatoes makes it down my throat without me thinking of my mom, my brother, the summertime, or the Price is Right. Instant mashed potatoes are nostalgic for me, and you would be wise not to say anything bad about them." In this way, these two students ask readers to consider how they "ingest" their own class distinctions each time they participate in "consumption" of both kinds.

Other students thought about how foods connect people or drive them apart, especially within families. Candace High writes, "I used to think that shrimp pasta salad made my parents get along. My mother never made anything my father liked, but when she made shrimp pasta salad, he was filled with sweet, simple comments like 'babe, you did good this time,'" while Sarah Hughes comments that as she grew up, she "learned that my family is not the idyllic family that seems to materialize on 'pierogi-day.' There are tensions and cracks in the dough that holds my family together, and as these tensions arise, my Nana struggles to patch them together before the substance of our family oozes away. [. . .] Roll, fill, pinch. Over and over. No cracks. No holes. Nana supervises, and we defer." Thus certain dishes become a kind of conversation—a way in which family members communicate love, frustration, desire, and pain.

Still other students enjoyed the ways in which food produces humor. Ashley Walker links her New Hampshire citizenship to a maple syrup debate. "That store-bought, chemical-flavored maple syrup is *not real*. Mrs. Butterworth's, Aunt Jemima, and sugar-free are figments of your maple-syrup imagination. If it comes in a clear plastic container with an easy-to-use, no-spill top, you've got a problem." Another humorist, Tom Evans, believes that in order to be a Redskins fan, one needed "a burning mouth" to "take your mind off the abysmal game": "You could tell what team the Skins were playing," recalled Tom, "just from my dad's chili for that week—when they played the Cowboys, we couldn't feel our tongues for a week." And Melissa Adams undermines assumptions about cooking expertise being in the genes. Despite her grandmother's marvelous corn pudding, Melissa admits, "I'm not a good cook. I'm the stereotypical Bridget-Jones-type chef who everyone chuckles at as she blows up hotdogs, burns steamed rice, and melts pasta. Any kitchen with me in it should have an Enter At Your Own Risk sign."

Finally, some students understood that there is no difference between the memories associated with certain dishes and the continued existence of their own bodies. "When I think of my birthday blueberry pie," writes Mali Fenton, "I don't think of allusions or symbols. I think of my mother's tan, strong arms stirring, her eyes blue as berries, her voice laughing. It's not the food that reminds me of books; it's seeing the book on a shelf that reminds me of the pie and my mother. Maybe a book about blueberries doesn't stir one memory in you; maybe you've never made the pie in your life. But it could be a book about meatloaf that conjures up your grandma's wrinkled face, or a song about lemons that invokes your sister. You find the book in your house, the song plays on the radio, and once again you taste the food in your mouth, feel the crumbs on your chest, and hear the laughter of your family in every re-imagined bite."

In this excerpt, note Mali's turn to the second-person "you." *You, you, you*, writes Mali, moving her essay past the limits of type and ink, insisting that the reader co-create meaning through food. In a communion ceremony, the reader/participant eats and drinks "in remembrance of me." Indeed, eating (or refusing to eat) syrup or chili or instant mashed potatoes is an act of remembrance: it is the memory of the body, not the text. It is flesh-and-blood memory, memory that is always already in the present tense. To quote Toni Morrison, it is re-memory.

Such writerly sophistication belies the assumptions made by purveyors of the arched eyebrow. Indeed, as a teacher of fiction writing, composition, women studies, and Victorian literature in addition to the literatures of food, I can attest that my Books That Cook students are more invested and experimental in their writing as well as more willing to try to match form with function than any other students I teach.

#### ASKING WHERE FOOD COMES FROM: MELISSA

As Jennifer acknowledges, the reading, assignments, discussions, and writing by students for a class such as Books That Cook are anything but monolithic. In 2003, before teaching Books That Cook for the first time, I had anticipated discussions of gender and tried—though the full-length books were written by women—to achieve both gender balance and multiple critical perspectives in the materials I included in the course packet. When analyzing cookbooks and reading critical articles in preparation for writing their own rhetorical analyses of cookbooks, students were surprised by how many of the books—from as early as the 1920s—were geared toward men. I remember one particularly rousing conversation about "Sweater Girl Salad," a recipe from the 1947 cookbook *The Groom Boils and Stews*, that included peaches, cottage cheese, and a cherry arranged to resemble female breasts. And one male student took particular delight in choosing *A Man, a Can, a Grill* as the subject of his rhetorical analysis. The two male students also frequently got a taste of their rare-until-this-class minority status when fourteen women turned in unison to get "the guy's view" on a character, theme, or issue in whatever text we were discussing. (Though I tried to curb this expectant bottom lining, I also wondered if these students would take this heightened awareness—a sense of what it feels like to be bottom-lined as *the* representative of a particular perspective—into other classes in which they were not the minority.)

Although gender issues were central to many of the texts we read, I hoped we would also deal with some larger, one might argue more basic, issues, such as where food comes from. In the first week of class, we introduced ourselves through foods and recipes important to ourselves and our families, but we then stepped back to consider eating as political, ethical, and agricultural acts. Wendell Berry, in "The Pleasures of Eating," describes a complex relationship, claiming, "Eaters [. . .] must understand that eating takes place inescapably in the world, that it is inescapably an agricultural act, and that how we eat determines, to a considerable extent, how the world is used" (149). We considered these issues in discussing the first full-length book we read in my section of Books That Cook, Sallie Tisdale's *The Best Thing I Ever Tasted*, which includes a rich mix of memoir, history, folklore, and sociological analysis. As my students did, Tisdale writes about a favorite childhood food—"Velveeta and Miracle Whip on soft slices of white bread, fried in margarine" (47)—but she also examines the forces beyond individuals that create desire and dictate what we eat: technological and social revolutions (from inventions to immigration), religion, hunger, test kitchens, advertising, disease, nostalgia.

Although we began with this question of where food comes from, discussing issues ranging from the ways food is contextual—how food moved from its original locality is completely changed—to how it is grown, we rarely discussed the kinds of

practical actions Berry encourages in “The Pleasures of Eating,” from growing one’s own food to buying local and learning the life histories of plants and animals (149–50), issues not always central to food memoirs, novels, and poetry. In the years since I taught Books That Cook for the first time, however, the literature has shifted, and I’ve seen a renewed awareness of how individual and community choices can affect not only one’s relationship to food but also the environment from which that food comes. Thus, as I develop a new syllabus for Books That Cook, I imagine the possibilities for taking some of Berry’s practical suggestions into account through teaching a service-learning version of the course, perhaps working alongside the Sisters of St. Francis at Red Hill, their organic farm in Aston, Pennsylvania, or participating in a Farm-to-College or Farm-to-School program.

In mid-May when the farmers markets start to open, I buy new books or set out ones I’ve already gathered. By June, the books begin to find their way from my office to the living room to my bedside table. Like the basil and tomatoes I’ve planted, the books seem to multiply overnight. This year, I have an influx of recent publications<sup>1</sup> that consider the fundamental question of where our food comes from. Michael Pollan in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* argues that “the way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world. Daily, our eating turns nature into culture, transforming the body of the world into our bodies and minds” (10). A growing subgenre of food literature that focuses on eating local foods also offers many choices: Gary Paul Nabhan’s *Coming Home to Eat: The Pleasures and Politics of Local Foods*; Bill McKibben’s “The Year of Eating Locally,” from his book *Deep Economy*; Alisa Smith and J. B. Mackinnon’s *Plenty*; and Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, which includes recipes developed by her then eighteen-year-old daughter.

A syllabus is a kind of recipe created from imagination, experience, and available ingredients—and with time constraints and audience in mind. As I do every summer, I read and cook, eat and think, call friends and colleagues for suggestions, and try to find or alter the recipe for my ever-changing course on the literatures of food. Recipes are best shared and tinkered with, and the creation of each dish—like each class—is slightly different, thanks not only to the ingredients but also to the differing tastes of those participants gathered to share.

#### APPRECIATING FULLNESS

Writing this article gave both of us a chance to think carefully about why we believe food and food literature have a place in the English classroom. Both of us have come to see Books That Cook as a course that offers much more than a chance to eat in class or get credit for “beach reading.” Instead, what we have learned about ourselves as teachers is in keeping with what we’ve witnessed in our classes: in studying

the literatures of food, we see an investment and a care in learning that we rarely see in other courses. As our students plan for, prepare, and share dishes out of published texts as well as out of their own food writings, class members listen to the voices of the cooks who have prepared this or that food. We are collectively moved by the embodiment of the book or the essay or the poem that students re-create in material form—as a fragrant blueberry pizza learned from a salt-of-the-earth aunt or as buttery mashed potatoes from Ephron’s *Heartburn*. In any given moment of eating, to quote Kenneth Burke, our entire class becomes consubstantial with the student-cook, with the author, with the text itself, as well as with the very sun, soil, and water that produced in the first place the foodstuff that nourishes us at the very same moment that it has the potential to poison us as well.

This magical act of consubstantiation is one of the key reasons we believe that food—and food writing—should be encouraged in the English classroom, even despite arched eyebrows. The literatures of food create both literal and metaphorical connections among members of our classes, between the books and our analyses of them, between bodies and minds. The word turned food turned flesh. Courses like Books That Cook provide a fitting forum for considering many issues central to literary study—from character, setting, plot, and literary devices to gender, family, and origins, as well as our very place in and impact upon the earth and its peoples. Such courses encourage us and our students to interrogate our own practices of consumption—consuming foodstuffs, consuming literature, and our role as first-world consumers of global resources—even as we appreciate the “fullness,” the literal surfeit and round, rich community, such eating, reading, and discussion provide.

#### NOTE

1. Concerns about where food comes from, of course, are by no means new: Tisdale dates her own “retreat from the mainstream American foodway” of processed convenience food to the 1970s, a decade in which food co-ops were springing up by the thousands (213), but until recently, such concerns were more often taken up by cookbook authors and journalists than by novelists, memoirists, and poets. My own cookbook collection includes Frances Moore Lappé’s 1971 *Diet For a Small Planet* and Dorris Janzer Longacre’s 1976 *More-with-Less Cookbook*, both of which recognize the problems associated with the over-consumption of processed foods and eating high on the food chain (not only personal health problems but also world hunger and environmental degradation) and encourage the kinds of eating and buying habits that create demand, therefore making certain ways of eating “commercially feasible” (Lappé 148). And Warren Belasco, in his 1989 *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry, 1966–1988*, examines natural-foods and organic-farming movements. Such texts provide a fitting historical backdrop for more recent releases, showing how the old informs the new.

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For two special issues of *College English*, we invite submissions, which should be sent electronically to the journal's office at [cesubs@indiana.edu](mailto:cesubs@indiana.edu) by July 1, 2008:

**Lincoln in English Studies:** In February 2009, historians will celebrate the bicentennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Why and how should our discipline study him, too? Besides his own rhetoric, contributors might examine how he has figured in works of fiction, visual culture, English courses, or English scholarship.

**Writing, Rhetoric, and Latinidad** (guest editors: **Damián Baca and Victor Villanueva**): With Latinas and Latinos comprising the United States' largest linguistic and ethnic "minority," this issue will consider the historical knowledge that the field of rhetoric and composition needs to construct socially relevant pedagogies. Particularly welcome are essays that define Latina/Latino rhetorics in comparison to Greco-Latin ones. How do we begin to understand a broader history of rhetoric within the Americas, for example? How can Latina/Latino rhetorics that pre-date the teaching of English in the Americas transform composition studies? How might resistant and de-colonial Latina and Latino rhetorics challenge Eurocentric histories and historiographies of writing and writing instruction? How can greater understanding of the unique historical trajectories of indigenous, Spanish, and English rhetorical ways affect our current attempts to include Latino and Latina language experiences in our composition classrooms? What are historical links among AmerIndian rhetorics (i.e., those of Latin American and Caribbean indigenous peoples as distinct from their more Northern brothers and sisters)? How would these have affected, and been affected by, Spanish colonial rhetorics?

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Named in honor of a distinguished past editor of *College English*, this award is given annually for outstanding article in the past year's volume of the journal. The 2007 winner is LuMing Mao from Miami University of Ohio, for "Studying the Chinese Rhetorical Tradition in the Present: Re-presenting the Native's Point of View" (January 2007, pp. 216–37). The award committee cited Mao's article as "a groundbreaking argument, an important advancement in the study not only of ancient Chinese rhetoric but also of historical and theoretical study of various rhetorical traditions—including the so-called Western rhetorical tradition."



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VOLUME 70

NUMBER 4

MARCH 2008

# COLLEGE ENGLISH

- 345 From the Editor**  
John Schillb
- 346 Consuming Prose: The Delectable Rhetoric of Food Writing**  
Lynn Z. Bloom
- 363 Food Memoirs: What They Are, Why They Are Popular, and Why They Belong in the Literature Classroom**  
Barbara Frey Waxman
- 384 Good, Clean, Fair: The Rhetoric of the Slow Food Movement**  
Stephen Schneider
- 403 The Organic Foods System: Its Discursive Achievements and Prospects**  
David M. Nowacek and Rebecca S. Nowacek
- 421 Books That Cook: Teaching Food and Food Literature in the English Classroom**  
Jennifer Cognard-Black and Melissa A. Goldthwaite
- Food Anecdotes**  
Susan Leonardi (362), Jeanne Gunner (383), Matthew S. S. Johnson (401), Min-Zhan Lu and Bruce Horner (420), Andrea Lunsford (436)
- 437 ANNOUNCEMENTS AND CALLS FOR PAPERS**