

J. MICHELLE COGHLAN

## Introduction: The Literature of Food

“Food,” as Molly Wizenberg has reminded us, “is never just food. It’s also a way of getting at something else: who we are, who we have been, and who we want to be.”<sup>1</sup> But what exactly is at stake when we step into the kitchen, choose a restaurant, watch a cooking show, or read about a meal someone else ate? Culinary texts and literary representations of both gustation and gastronomy help bring into profound relief the degree to which food has long served as a cultural marker of complex and oft-conflicting desires, affiliations, and identities – national belonging and regional attachments, class distinctions and racial stereotypes, gender norms and sexual appetites, agricultural policies and imperial legacies, public agendas and personal tastes. Yet pausing over how literary forms register the most ephemeral of somatic sensations also pushes us to grapple with what material traces might be left by the most visceral, seemingly unarchivable, of gustatory experiences (and their lack). And it does so at a moment when the virtual turn in our everyday life paradoxically – and, indeed, symptomatically – has newly reoriented us to taste as a sensation even as the ecological crisis on our horizon shadows the emergence of contemporary foodie culture and our relationship to the recipes and snapshots of food ever-present on our social mediascapes.

This *Companion* takes as its starting point the contention that literature, from the feasts depicted in medieval romances to the “bulletry bottled peas and pseudo-cottage bread [that is] the menu of Anglo-India” in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, offers unique insight into the complexity of food matters even as it works at once to archive and refashion our tastes in a gastronomic sense. The sixteen essays commissioned for this collection provide an expansive overview of literary representations of gustation, gastronomy, agriculture, and alimentary activism from the medieval and early modern periods to the twenty-first century, and offer a variety of historical and theoretical approaches to reading the cultural and aesthetic work of food across those periods, including gender and sexuality, critical race studies, postcolonial studies, ecocriticism, and children’s literature. But the volume is

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equally concerned with addressing culinary texts – cookbooks, food manifestos, household manuals, and food blogs – as worthy of literary study in their own right. Although nineteenth-century American food writer Elizabeth Robbins Pennell insisted that “a cookery book can have every good quality that a book can have,” and despite the fact that many nineteenth-century American cookery writers successfully published in a variety of other genres, including poetry and detective fiction, literary studies has been slow to recognize culinary writing as both a literary and a cultural text.<sup>2</sup> Responding to recent developments in the field of literary studies – in particular, Susan J. Leonardi’s pioneering analysis of cookbooks as complex narrative forms and Kyla Wazana Tompkins’s recent work on recipes as disjunctive poetic forms – this volume explores culinary literature from early modern receipt books to 1970s Black Power cookbooks (and beyond) as an identifiable literary tradition whose aesthetic conventions and formal experiments should be read as part of – rather than adjacent to – the other forms of literature produced in its period.<sup>3</sup>

The turn to cookbooks as literature, as well as the growing interest in the literature of food exemplified in this volume, has its roots in the rise of Food Studies. Although the Association for the Study of Food and Society was established in 1985, the term “food studies” first emerges in the 1990s, when a range of disciplines – among them, anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, women’s studies, and history – began to analyze food and foodways. In turn, US universities began to establish degree programs in the interdisciplinary study of the cultural, economic, historical, and geographic aspects of food; among the first was New York University’s Department of Nutrition and Food Studies, founded in 1996, the same year that the journal *Food, Culture and Society* published its inaugural issue.<sup>4</sup> While the social sciences dominated much of the early work produced in the field, the founding of *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* in 2001 underscored the crystallization of the field as such and highlighted the insights the humanities could bring to the study and stakes of food in all its forms.

There are a number of possible origin stories for the field of food studies. Most converge on the moment when food came to matter in new ways in the 1960s and 1970s because of pioneering work by anthropologists Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. As food studies scholar Marion Nestle puts it, “I think of Lévi-Strauss as the inventor of the field of Food Studies before the field existed.”<sup>5</sup> In *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), Lévi-Strauss identified cooking as a symbolic language, showing how the cook transforms raw materials into socially sanctioned edibles, and suggesting that food in its raw, cooked, and rotten forms constantly traverses the boundaries of nature and culture.<sup>6</sup> Douglas suggested in essays such as “Deciphering a Meal” (1972)

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that meals were worth our notice because they were biological and social acts as well as elaborate social codes.<sup>7</sup> Building on such work, Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Judgment of Taste* (1979) argued that what and how we eat – not to mention, what and how we eat in front of others – carries with it what he termed “cultural capital,” and taste, in turn, helps to reinforce at once social privilege and access to economic capital.<sup>8</sup> Six years later, anthropologist Sidney Mintz's groundbreaking *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (1985) traced how the importation of sugar cane transformed the Caribbean ecology and catalyzed the global slave trade, even as the exportation of refined sugar back to Europe drove the diets of its newly urban working-class poor and the pace of industrialization itself.<sup>9</sup> Such work helped to usher in a number of single-commodity histories aimed at scholarly and popular audiences, including Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants* (1992), James C. McCann's *Maize and Grace: Africa's Encounter with a New World Crop, 1500–2000* (2005), and Lizzie Collingham's *The Taste of Empire: How Britain's Quest for Food Shaped the Modern World* (2017).<sup>10</sup>

Let us explore an alternative entryway into both food studies, more broadly, and literary food studies, more particularly. In 1957, French literary theorist Roland Barthes published *Mythologies*, a collection of essays aimed at interrogating the modern myths of everyday French life, myths everywhere reinforced by glossy magazines and popular culture. In one such essay, “Wine and Milk,” Barthes took aim at wine, his nation's preeminent national drink, and sought to de-naturalize his compatriots' relationship to their daily act of drinking it. Wine, he finally insisted,

is a good and fine substance, but it is no less true that its production is deeply involved in French capitalism, whether it is that of the French distillers, or that of the big settlers in Algeria who impose on the Muslims, on the very land of which they have been dispossessed, a crop of which they have no need, while they lack even bread. There are thus very engaging myths which are, however, not innocent. And the characteristic of our current alienation is precisely that wine cannot be an unalloyedly blissful substance, except if we wrongly forget that it is also the product of expropriation.<sup>11</sup>

Barthes points here to the entanglement of French wine production and French imperialism, and gestures, too, to the war over Algerian independence then being brutally fought by the French paratroopers known as *parachutists*. (This paragraph notably did not conclude the essay when it first appeared in the literary review *Lettres Nouvelles* in April 1955: the escalation of the war, as Joseph Bohling points out, led to its inclusion in 1957.<sup>12</sup>) But Barthes also highlights here how much our pleasures and our tastes – even our favorite drinks – are products of labor often erased by the corporations that produce and market

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them to us. A choice of beverages thus necessarily entangles us in longer histories of labor and empire, and more specifically, in agricultural exploitation and colonial histories that long ensured wine (or bread) would be enjoyed in the metropole while those producing it would go hungry, agricultural circuits and inequities taken up in a number of chapters in this *Companion*, among them those by Parama Roy, Jonathan Bishop Highfield, Sarah D. Wald, Michael Newbury, and Allison Carruth. But in turning his attention to wine, that otherwise “unalloyedly blissful substance,” Barthes also wanted us to see how the everyday ritual of drinking transubstantiated a given liquid into an altogether other order of thing: a collective source of identification, class distinction, and conviviality, as well as a crucial marker of exclusion for those who choose, for religious, cultural, or health reasons, not to partake of (and in) it, a drama of culinary identity formation explored and complicated by Lauren Klein, Katharina Vester, Anne Anlin Cheng, and Emily Contois in this volume.

If Barthes’ reflections on wine as social signifier and imperial product seem today deeply timely, it was significantly not always thus. When literary critic Jonathan Culler reviewed the first English translation of *Mythologies* in 1973 in the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, he complained the volume had aged badly: “The book is now read in a situation which makes it a myth: for the English reader it does not challenge what he takes for granted and engage the culture which surrounds him; it says, rather, ‘look how one of those fashionable structuralists performs.’”<sup>13</sup> Culler suggested the essays were inaccessible for the English reader, engaging matters too distant from known history that didn’t matter beyond France. And he cites in particular Barthes’ attention to wine, milk, steak, and chips as likely to strike the English reader as “ingenuous but gratuitous exercises” despite the fact that Barthes’ insights on the relationship between food production, national taste, cultural expropriation and empire would impact upon English eating – as well as US food cultures – in equal measure.<sup>14</sup> That these essays could seem extraneous four decades ago in a way that they now seem indispensable is a sign of how much food has come to saturate our everyday life – becoming not simply something in which we do or do not partake, but instead something we everywhere watch and read and write about as much as eat. (That contemporary foodie culture has its roots in the moment in the nineteenth century when cookbooks first began to outpace the sales of literary celebrities and the rise of the modern restaurant encouraged urban dwellers to become voyeurs at the meals that others ate is taken up by Denise Gigante and Kate Thomas in their chapters for this *Companion*.) But it also points to the degree to which literary studies has come to take food and food matters seriously.

Over the past two decades, a number of groundbreaking books have been published on the topic of literature and taste in the gastronomic sense, among

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them Doris Witt's *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America* (1999), Robert Appelbaum's *Aguecheek's Beef, Belch's Hiccup and Other Gastronomic Interjections: Literature, Culture and Food Among the Early Moderns* (2006), Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard's *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature* (2009), and Allison Carruth's *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (2013). And attention to matters of gastronomy, consumption, hunger, agriculture, and alimentary activism has reshaped a number of fields in literary studies – crucially shifting, for example, our understandings of taste in a gastronomic and aesthetic sense, race as a curiously edible literary matter, and empire and its fictions as inescapably routed through the mouth.<sup>15</sup> Our contemporary moment's obsession with foodie culture, food blogs, so-called “food porn” and a variety of bestselling food exposés and food memoirs have helped to fuel the publication of several recent anthologies of food writing and food literature, including *Eating Words: A Norton Anthology of Food Writing* (Ed. Sandra M. Gilbert, 2015) and the Library of America's *American Food Writing: An Anthology with Classic Recipes* (Ed. Molly O'Neill, 2009). While these anthologies are aimed at a broad readership, and suggest a substantial interest in the literature of food beyond the academy, they also speak to the growing number of undergraduate and graduate courses examining food matters and/in literature being offered by departments of English, Comparative Literature, Ethnic Studies, and American Studies, another testament to the vibrancy of the field.

This *Companion* brings into relief the dynamism of literary food studies by way of chapters that rethink the work of food as metaphor and material chronologically, from the depictions of decorous feasting in *The Canterbury Tales* to “dude food” in contemporary food blogs. But as the relationship between literature and hunger, gustation, gastronomy, agriculture, and alimentary activism is as capacious as it is complex, several of its chapters – including “Queering the Cookbook,” “Postcolonial Tastes,” “Black Power in the Kitchen,” and “Guilty Pleasures in Children's Literature” – offer accounts of literary food and its lack that pointedly cross-cut across traditional periods in order to better illuminate the aesthetics and politics of both literary food and culinary texts. From mealtime decorum in Chaucer and serialized Victorian dining to modernist food experiments, queer cookbooks, and the literature of farmworker activism, it takes up a rich array of authors and thematic approaches to literary food studies. Taken together, the volume traces the effervescent interchange between literature and emerging (or rapidly changing) culinary scenes; highlights recipes as a key medium of literary experimentation and gender formation as well as subversion; explores food production and food insecurity as unfinished sites of anti-colonial struggle as

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well as contemporary activism and horror; and showcases literature as a crucial site for at once exploring and vexing the relationship between identity and food.

### New Culinary and Literary Scenes

The medieval world's power plays and politics emerged in and out of banquets: "power was edible, sovereignty recognized as culinary privilege, conduct measured in terms of the shared meal," as Aaron Hostetter argues in his chapter on "Medieval Feasts" (Chapter 1). While we might be inclined to read the elaborate feasting detailed in texts like the *Alliterative Morte Arthure* as mere literary fancy or minor background detail, Hostetter points out that medieval historical texts record similarly lavish, multi-sensory meals and a range of literary texts, from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to *Havelok* and the mystic writings of Julian of Norwich, underscore medieval culture's attentiveness to the cultural capital latent in food – not that we are what we eat so much as we become to the world by what we are seen to eat. In tracking both the carefully choreographed pageantry of aristocratic tables and concerns about hygienic practices in public kitchens, Hostetter shows how medieval food became a vehicle for sharp literary satire and shrewd literary figuration.

The revolution in taste which occurred during the early decades of the nineteenth century went beyond the poetic experimentations of Romantic writers such as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and was as much a literal phenomenon as a literary one, as Denise Gigante points out in her chapter, "The Romantic Revolution in Taste" (Chapter 3). Gigante reminds us that gastronomy emerges at this moment and involved a critical overturning of the philosophical hierarchy of the senses, countering Enlightenment taste philosophers who privileged sight over gustation and divorced aesthetic discrimination from the body. She surveys how William Hazlitt sought to define this new "gustatory aesthetics" in his essays and the ways that John Keats embraced this full-bodied aesthetic in his poetry. And she argues that William Lamb's epicurean essay, "A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig" and Percy Bysshe Shelley's treatise on vegetarianism, *A Vindication of Natural Diet*, reflect not only the moment when the emerging institutions of gastronomic culture – restaurants, tasting juries, food journalism, dining clubs – fundamentally resituated the role of somatic taste in everyday life and aesthetic practice, but also the ways the revolutionary ferment of the French revolution catalyzed new concern for the sufferings animals endured for human pleasure.

Food has long been treated as potential poison or fondest indulgence in Anglo-American children's literature, as Catherine Keyser points in her

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chapter, “Guilty Pleasures in Children’s Literature” (Chapter 10). Keyser focuses her essay on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a moment when the changing landscape of food – in particular, the emergence of factory farming, industrialized foods, artificial flavors, nutrition science, and psychoanalysis – profoundly impacted the stories children’s literature would come to tell about the pleasures and dangers of eating. She tracks how turn-of-the-century literature such as *The Secret Garden* and *Mary Poppins* aimed at controlling children’s appetites, while African American writers such as Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar worked to counter the edibility of African American bodies in their writing on and for African American children. Keyser argues that food insecurity and scarcity during the Depression and World War II sharpened the depictions of childhood poverty and regional foodways in texts like Lois Lenski’s *Spinach Boy* and Helen Kay’s *Battle in the Barnyard*. In turn, animals gorging on “just the leavings” in E.B. White’s *Charlotte’s Web* points to postwar US overabundance, a period which notably coincides with the emergence of a new character in US children’s literature – the picky eater. But she also explores how increasing nostalgia for rapidly disappearing foodways in texts like the *Little House on the Prairie* series document small-scale farming and food production processes on their way out.

### Culinary Experimentation and the Literature of Cookbooks

Joe Moshenska’s “The Art of Early Modern Cookery” (Chapter 2) examines the ways that Early Modern recipe culture allowed women space to participate in literary experimentation and suggests that culinary expertise engaged experimental knowledge in ways that make it best read as crucially part of, rather than simply coincidentally adjacent to, the Scientific Revolution taking place in this period. Illuminating key cultural shifts which shaped the way that cooking and eating came to be bound up with the reading and writing of early modern literature in ways that provoked delight and anxiety – among them, religious debates about the Eucharist, colonial expansion (and with it, new tastes, ingredients, labor), changing etiquette, and new understandings of the body and digestion – Moshenska then focuses his attention on the evocations of food and culinary matters in the writings of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle and John Milton. He argues that where Cavendish drew on food to craft her authorial persona and distance herself from precisely the contemporary domestic and philosophical figures with whom she might have been identified, Milton’s use of food even more intimately reveals and reconfigures the connection between eating and knowledge.

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In the early nineteenth century, sales of cookbooks such as *Apicius Redevivus, or the Cook's Oracle* (1817) began to exceed that of literary celebrities like Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott, as Denise Gigante reminds us in this volume, and this publishing trend only gained further momentum in the decades that followed. As Kate Thomas points out in “The Culinary Landscape of Victorian Literature” (Chapter 5) Victorian cookbooks like Isabella Beeton’s *Book of Household Management* (1859) became runaway bestsellers, selling sixty thousand copies in its first year alone. Thomas argues that Beeton’s success points both to her clever adaptations of recent innovations in the form of cookery books and the way reconfigurations of gender in the wake of industrialization led to an ever-growing market for commercial cookbooks. But she also suggests that a new relationship between eating and reading emerges in the Victorian era. Realist novels lingered over what their characters were eating while influential novelists such as Thackeray and Dickens authored recipes and reviewed cookbooks. The rise of restaurants led to menus of novel-like proportions, the emergence of plate-glass windows invited Victorian passers-by to be voyeurs at the dining of others, and, as Thomas argues, eating itself become episodic through the introduction of courses brought to the table sequentially, unexpectedly mirroring the period’s penchant for serialized reading.

Cookbooks once again became a key site of literary experimentation in the early to mid-twentieth century, as Allison Carruth traces for us in her chapter on “Modernism and Gastronomy” (Chapter 6). Gastronomy emerges in the nineteenth century as a popular print cultural form whose epicenter was Paris, and as Carruth points out, it is best understood as a capacious frame rather than a singular genre, encompassing guidebooks, manuals, treatises, memoirs, and restaurant reviews. The turn to the twentieth century saw at once an explosion of gastronomic writing and an increasingly strong reaction against anything that smacked of bourgeois food cultures by experimental writers and artists ranging from modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, and Gertrude Stein to later EAT/Flexus artists in the 1960s. Carruth reads F.T. Marinetti’s critique of Italian culinary traditions in *The Futurist Cookbook* (1932) as an anti-gastronomy manifesto as well as an experiment in rethinking the boundaries of the cookbook form, arguing that its mix of weird, impossible to recreate recipes, polemical musings, and spectacles from the Futurist test kitchen in Turin ultimately “unravel the recipe form” by short-circuiting knowledge sharing or reproducibility in the service of what Carruth terms “steel-powered nationalism.” By contrast, M.F.K. Fisher’s *How To Cook a Wolf* (1942), which draws on modernist modes such as non-linear narrative, montage, and irony, emerges in her reading as an experimental culinary text which both celebrates gastronomic pleasure and meditates on the material



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scarcity of wartime food rationing and, with it, the uneven distribution of wartime hunger. In so doing, it counters narratives of shared national sacrifice, something Carruth argues modernist writer Lorine Niedicker similarly takes up at length in her *New Goose* poems.

My chapter, “Cold War Cooking” (Chapter 7), turns to Julia Child’s role in the “hot kitchen” of Cold War culture, and her unlikely repurposing of the trans-national domestic front in her iconic 1961 cookbook, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. Recent commentators have suggested that the OSS researcher, food writer, TV celebrity, and domestic goddess single-handedly “re-outfitted the American kitchen and re-educated the American palate.” But when Julia arrived in France in 1948, the country was scarred by war and reeling from deprivation – was, in other words, far from a foodie paradise. Child’s memoirs reveal her keen awareness of postwar scarcity, and the postwar politics of being an American in Paris in the age of both McCarthy and the Marshall Plan. Reading *My Life in France* alongside *Mastering* and Child’s collected letters, I uncover how her work to translate French cuisine for an American audience pivotally upended Cold War domestic ideology, countering narratives of American modernity and postwar abundance with visions of French leisure, luxury, and culinary extravagance.

Erica Fretwell explores African American women’s cookbooks as an important, all too often overlooked, genre of African American’s women’s writing in her chapter, “Black Power in the Kitchen” (Chapter 12). Charting the genre from two seminal postbellum texts, Malinda Russell’s *A Domestic Cook Book* (1866) and Abby Fisher’s *What Mrs. Fisher Knows about Old Southern Cooking* (1881) through to the emergence of community cookbooks in the early twentieth century and experimental, Black Power-influenced cookbooks in the 1970s, Fretwell argues that African American women’s cookbooks are not only a key space where foods, social formations and politics are cooked up, but also a vital site of African American literary experimentation. She recovers how the cookbook form offered a prime vehicle to authorship for African American women in the post-Civil War period, and crucially countered the Mammy stereotype and cultural images that represented the culinary skills of African American cooks as mere instinct rather than art. She then turns to the ways collaboratively authored community cookbooks embraced domestic science and moved away from southern dishes in their project of culinary-social uplift and assimilation. By contrast, the rise of black nationalism in the 1970s led African American cookbook authors such as Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor in *Vibration Cooking* (1970) to embrace diasporic foodstuffs and a new mode of culinary writing – merging memoir, history, and poetry. Such radical culinary experimentation, Fretwell argues, allowed the inclusion and

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framing of traditional American recipes such as “So-called ‘Indian’ Pudding” to function as powerful critiques of New World colonial violence and slavery.

With the emergence of food blogging in 1999, and the stratospheric success of Julie Powell’s 2002 blog, *The Julie/Julia Project*, the cookbook has found new life in virtual form. Food blogs mirror older cookbook forms by featuring autobiographical writing alongside recipes and drawing on the stylized food photography first popularized in mid-twentieth century culinary magazines and cookbooks. But as Emily Contois takes up in, “Blogging Food, Performing Gender” (Chapter 16), they are also a notably more interactive genre, with reader likes and comments sharpening the previously largely only implied relationship between recipe author and reader. Where much recent scholarship on food blogs focuses on women readers and bloggers, and argues that they represent a post-feminist embrace of retrograde forms of domesticity, Contois’ chapter attends instead to the ways food blogs – specifically, those geared to the demarcation, celebration, and preparation of “dude food” – shape conflicting visions of contemporary masculinity in US culture.

### Farm Horror and Agricultural Activism

The history of taste, as Parama Roy takes up in her chapter, “Postcolonial Tastes” (Chapter 11), is deeply intertwined with the history (and horror) of empire: medieval and early modern taste for exotic spices drove New World expansion, much as the growing demand for sugar across Europe drove the Atlantic slave trade. In turn, colonial policies led to and exacerbated famine in India and Ireland in the eighteenth century and beyond. Roy highlights that food and its lack unsurprisingly figure prominently in a variety of postcolonial texts – from memoirs such as Sara Suleri’s *Meatless Days* (1989) and Wole Soyinka’s *Aké: The Years of Childhood* (1981) to novels such as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* (1988), Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1996), and Monique Truong’s *Book of Salt* (2003) – but notes alimentary matters have until recently received scant attention from literary critics. Parsing a variety of ways postcolonial writers mobilize this ecology of alimentation, Roy underscores both the significance of hunger as a vital site of figuring and enacting anti-colonial protest, and cannibalism as a trope for Caribbean writers to rethink their relationship to the global North and theorize new ways of eating well.

Jonathan Bishop Highfield’s chapter, “Postcolonial Foodways in Contemporary African Culture” (Chapter 15), is similarly interested in the ways that empire is enmeshed in food and foodways, most particularly, the colonial policies which caused food insecurity and hunger in Africa, forced