Rumblings from the World of Food

To the Editor

Food Porn

It saddens me that concepts within the general genre of culinaria continue to be so Eurocentric in their ideologies. The author, Anne E. McBride, asks Will Goldfarb if there is such a thing as food porn and gets back as a response that food porn is a meaningless and artificial replacement for sex. I disagree, and direct your attention to Japanese artist and pornography producer Daikichi Amano. He has revolutionized the concept of "Genke Porn," which really is a combination of food and pornography. (Ironically, *genke* in Japanese means "good," and the images he creates are simultaneously revolting and intriguing.)

Hearkening back to Baudelaire, Daikichi weaves together themes of sex and death in both an offensive and also a groundbreaking sense. We are witness to scenes of lesbianism, which take sacred love to a profane and oppressively corrupt level. Amano's young actresses literally have all of their bodily orifices stuffed with live animals: hundreds of tiny eels, frogs, and insects. And as they expel both dead and live animals from their bodies, they appear consumed by a frenzy of consumption and sexual freedom.

In Daikichi's work we can see the early groundbreaking films of Peter Greenaway, where the violently absurd is paired with delightfully erotic images to an extent beyond most viewers' previous experience. While Greenaway exposed us to spectacles of mass nudity and urination coupled with timed syncopated movements and Shakespearean dialogue in films such as *Prospero's Books*, Daikichi Amano further pushes the boundaries of visceral sexuality to a point of total annihilation with scenes of sensual bodies reveling in an ecstasy of copulation and degradation.

While Daikichi considers his live-action work to be pornography, there are many who consider it art. It is interesting that he does not ask his actresses to enwrap themselves with live octopi—tentacles writhing in and out of their mouths, anuses, and vaginas—unless he has done so first himself. These women are ravished by the giant cephalopods, as they themselves ravish these creatures with their mouths and bodies, consuming and being consumed. The devouring of the animals by the actors is violent and compulsive.

When asked about the source of his ideas, Amano states that he gets them from those among his customers who request specific scenes. In one scene, milk is inserted into a girl's anus and then a live fish drinks the milk straight from her orifice, after which the fish is grasped by a man who, holding it above his open mouth, proceeds to drink the very same milk. Thus the milk is passed from girl to fish to man. Finally, the fish—a partner in their macabre sexual union—is also consumed, thereby completing this cannibalistic triad of perversion. To which I can only respond: Wow!

—Carolyn Tillie, San Francisco, CA

Anne E. McBride and Will Goldfarb respond:

What Daikichi does is beyond the scope of food porn in popular culture and its everyday use that we discussed in the piece. We addressed "food porn" as a stand-alone concept and as a widely used label, not so much as one where the terms moved around—pornography with food—if that makes sense. I very much appreciate the comment re Eurocentrism and agree that too often food scholarship does not look beyond Western works; however, in this particular case, because we addressed food porn as it appears in our daily lives, in what surrounds us, it makes sense that it thus was treated through a Western lens.

—Anne E. McBride

I appreciate the criticism of our forum on Food Porn and want to clarify some of the issues Carolyn Tillie raises in her letter. Like Ms. Tillie, I also disagree with the argument that food porn is a meaningless and artificial substitute for sex; in fact, I

made clear in my comments that food porn is *not* a substitute for either cooking or sex. My central argument was that the term *food porn* itself is meaningless. If, however, I were to accept that there is even such a thing as food porn, I can begin to respond to Ms. Tillie's concerns.

I write from Bali, Indonesia, where my perspective is decidedly non-Western. It may very well be that "Eurocentrism" is prevalent in food criticism, but I am not sure against whom this accusation of bias can be directed. Our forum related primarily to the imagery of food in magazines and on TV. Although Daikichi seems to be a fascinating artist, from Ms. Tillie's description of his art I see absolutely no correlation to any of the central tenets put forth in our discussion of "food porn." The artist seems to be working in a space that lies midway between art and porn, with little concern for the marketing of food products or for the food pundits who make their living from the imaginary world of food porn.

I look forward to continuing this dialogue.

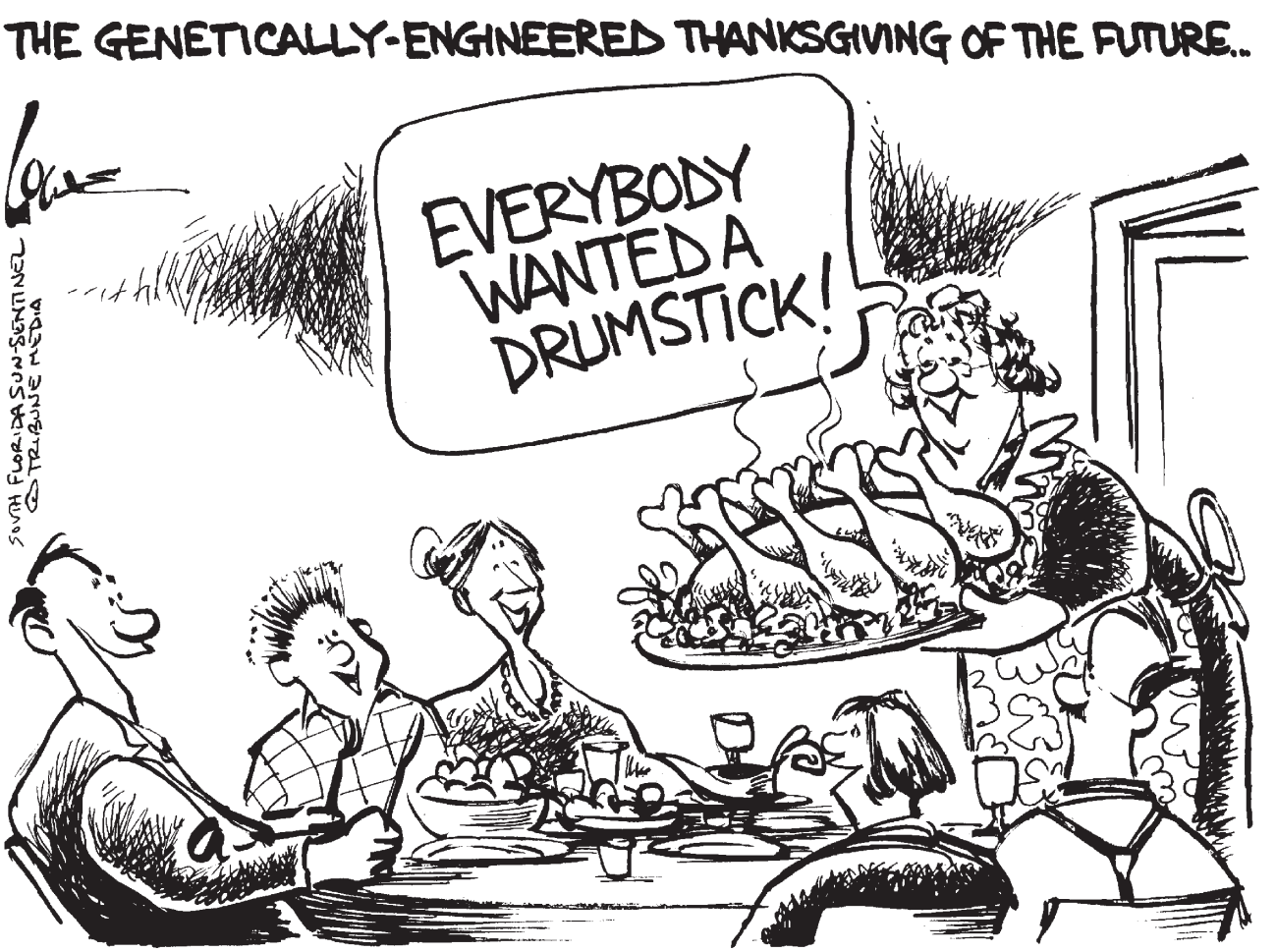
—Will Goldfarb

An Abbasid Luncheon

MICHAEL COOPERSON

A few years ago I was trapped on a transcontinental flight that served no meals. I might not have minded being hungry except for one thing: the entertainment system was on the blink and the only thing that worked was the Food Channel. I turned my system off, but most of my fellow passengers didn't. So I spent the six hours tantalized by potato salads and pecan pies line-dancing their way down twenty rows of tiny screens.

As a cultural historian of the early Abbasid Caliphate—the empire that ruled Southwest Asia from 750 to 1258—I've spent the past two decades reading about food I couldn't eat. The Arabic poetry and prose of the period fly into raptures about food. Here, for example, is a speech by an eleventh-century party crasher asked to list the delicacies of Baghdad: "Purified oil pressed from greases, dates, sausages, braided meat, filets, Rashidi kababs, spiced flanks, pregnant hens, chicks still fed in the nest, francolins and geese just sprouting feathers, grilled sides dripping, O God, juice, the sugared walnuts flowing with grease and broth, and *shawarma*,



Above: *The* khassiyyah *prepared by Brigitte Caland for her Abbasid luncheon at Mélisse restaurant, Los Angeles, May 30, 2010.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIENNE HUS © 2010

and pomegranate vinaigrette with *sikbaj* cooked in wine vinegar, with young lamb's meat on top, and chicks just ready to fly, and water fowl, and yellow domestic songbirds, with peeled almonds inside, and Khurasani raisins, and Jujani jujube, and confectioner's figs garnished with citron leaves." (This translation, by Emily Selove, deftly reproduces the famished staccato of the original.)

I had been reading texts like this for years, but except for a few items—almonds, raisins, *shawarma*—I had only a vague idea of how these foods may have tasted. Even that idea was probably wrong: why should *shawarma* made halfway across the world a thousand years ago taste the way it does in Los Angeles today? And what's *sikbaj*, anyway?

Sikbaj, it turns out, is a beef stew prepared with aspic. It jiggles in translucent splendor, just as the poets promise. I know this thanks to Brigitte Caland, who served it, along with a dozen other Abbasid dishes, as part of her luncheon series on historical cuisines. Raised in Lebanon and France, Brigitte is pursuing a doctorate at the Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales in Paris. Compared to the raft of languages she drew on to research her earlier lunches—Mesopotamia, Ancient Egypt, Old Testament, New Testament, Greece, Rome—the Abbasid event required only three: Arabic, French, and English. The latter came in handy mostly because Charles Perry, an authority on Near Eastern culinary traditions, has translated several Abbasid cookbooks into that language. Charles also happens to live in LA, and he agreed to talk about each of the dishes as it appeared. (*Sikbaj*, as it turns out, may be the ancestor of *escabeche*.) It was a good thing, too, as many required explanation.

One of these was *bazmaward*, which turned out to be a wrap-it-yourself chicken burrito filled out with chopped nuts and fresh herbs. Another was *muzawwarah*, "counterfeit," the Abbasid solution to the problem of what to do when you don't have enough bone marrow for all your guests: shape walnut foam into a cylinder and flavor it like marrow. Baghdad's answer to Yorkshire pudding was the *judhabah*: bread over a layer of apricots or bananas put under the grill to soak up the drippings of roasting chickens. Another royal Persian dish was the *isfidhabaja*, a medley of roasted meats and chickpeas topped with a poached egg. Of the desserts, the standout was the inscrutable *khassiyyah*, a cold, black, starchy dish built on lettuce and poppy seeds.

Watching these marvels pop from the kitchen one after another, and tasting dishes last prepared before Baghdad fell to the Mongols, I realized that Brigitte had wrestled my texts to the ground in a way that no seminar room full of philologists could ever manage. All a pedant can offer in return is a text that celebrates the artistry of an expert chef. Our eleventh-century party crasher has this to say about an Ethiopian chef he met in Baghdad: "Understanding all at a glance and divining the meaning of the slightest gesture, he knew what you wanted before you did, as if he could read the mind of both guest and host. His cooking could whet the appetite of the sleepy, the bereaved, the drunk, and the troubled; and whenever he ran out of something and was asked, 'What do you need?' he would say, 'Just hungry people.'"

Brigitte Caland's Abbasid luncheon took place on May 30, 2010, at Mélisse in Los Angeles. Her next historical meal, scheduled for February, will be inspired by the cuisine of Al Andalus. For more information contact Brigitte at brigittecaland@hotmail.com.

The ABCs of Eating

CHARLOTTE DRUCKMAN

Edible Schoolyard: A Universal Idea is the title of Alice Waters's book devoted to the noble cause of "edible education." But isn't every idea universal? It's the actualization of

Above: *The Eat NYC Club at Roberta's in Bushwick, Brooklyn.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER BOYLAN © 2010

an ideology or notion that can be prohibitive. That is one of the hardest challenges the Waters initiative faces—putting the concept into practice. The story of the first public school in Berkeley that, through a garden, connected children to their food and its origins, is, for many, more like a fairy tale than a viable model. One day, perhaps, every public school will have a budget for its own Edible Schoolyard (ESY). In the meantime, what are struggling inner-city institutions without a blade of grass in sight or deep-pocketed supporters to do about indoctrinating students?

Jennifer Boylan, an English teacher at New York City's High School for Math, Science and Engineering at CCNY (City College of New York), a public institution for gifted teens, found herself asking this question and, in an attempt to answer it, started a gastronomy program at her school in 2008. Her approach shares many of the same objectives as the ESY programs, but there are the obvious differences—the absence of a garden and kitchen space. So far, these lacks have not been a hindrance to achieving the shared goals. "This class also creates a safe place for students to learn about their connectedness to the land and the impact of their choices on their health, the well-being of others, and the environment," Boylan says. "Whether it's through an edible garden or a gastronomy curriculum, we're teaching food consciousness…we're teaching each of these kids to reevaluate their culture of buying, consuming, producing, and sharing food. I see that as a huge responsibility to them—and to the chain of players affected by those choices."

While the ESY efforts are aimed at elementary school students, Boylan's focus is on older students—teenagers—which allows her to engage them in the kind of analytical thinking and questioning that might be applied to other disciplines within the humanities—history, literature, or philosophy, for starters. "This curriculum," she advocates, "ought to become a mandatory class of its own. It hones a higher level of critical reading, writing, and thinking skills, and the subject is essential to make our kids responsible global citizens and consumers. It is interdisciplinary. We discuss Farm Bill policy, GMOs, the UN Report of Food Security, but also philosophy, milk chemistry, and religious traditions."

Cheese played a big role in Boylan's thinking. Motivated by a job she once held at the cheese counter at Zingerman's in Ann Arbor, and, later, by an internship at Murray's Cheese in New York City, an influential cheese emporium, Boylan began to think about a new idea for a high school class. At first it was a simple wish for her students to try all of the runny *époisses* she had learned to love. Soon, she grew more ambitious. Taylor Cocalis, then running Murray's education program, was instrumental in helping Boylan turn her vision into a reading curriculum. Yet her strong

foundation in food artisanship was not enough. When it came to the bigger picture—food production, farming practices, agribusiness, and related legislature and government policy—Boylan had a steep learning curve.

"It evolved on its own. I'd read *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, which helped me frame the curriculum. My first students were incredibly open-minded, and willing to try everything. I used a lot of information that was being published at that time," she explains. She was also inspired by Scott Korb, a creative writing teacher at NYU who "had some great ideas about food writing" and introduced her to David Foster Wallace's "Consider the Lobster." That essay is now part of the ethics unit, a major component of the curriculum.

Boylan begins the course by forging a definition of gastronomy with some help from Brilliat-Savarin's *The Physiology of Taste*. The kids share their expectations for the semester ahead and their preconceived notions of food and its origins. Three more classes are then devoted to reading and analyzing Carlo Petrini's *Slow Food Nation*. Next, "we dive into the meat, so to speak," jokes Boylan: Michael Pollan's "An Animal's Place," a piece penned for the *New York Times Magazine* in response to Peter Singer's "All Animals Are Equal," and Singer's rebuttal to Pollan's article. Students were also powerfully affected by Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*. Discussions of these different points of view are guided by the basic premise that access to good food is a right.

Then there are the taste workshops, the most interactive, hands-on part of the course, and they are crucial to Boylan's multitiered approach. What New York City lacks in arable land, it makes up for in taste thrills. "It's hardly a food desert in terms of teaching," she says. "We don't have the gardening, but we do have the chefs, and there are green places and farms nearby." Almost everyone Boylan reached out to—producers, purveyors, and chefs—responded positively. The experiences provided by these experts in the proverbial (and literal) field, Boylan believes, "are just as meaningful as the rooftop garden, and more economical."

Many of her students in the gastronomy elective tell their parents what they have absorbed and how they feel about what's on the dinner table. In turn, those parents tell Boylan that they are making changes. "In a class of twenty, five or six parents this year came and told me they're finding better sources for their meats." Although this is heartening news, there is still the issue of cost. None of Boylan's students wants Butterball turkeys anymore, but the heritage breeds are not always affordable. For now, Boylan can take pride in the fact that her students know the difference and want the better option. When what they want is out of reach, she teaches them how to seek alternatives. Some have already gone on to make their own culinary marks. One has started an independent gastronomy program at Vanderbilt University; another is in Michigan working at Zingerman's for the summer; a third is studying molecular gastronomy.

Food Justice Conference

From February 19–21, 2011, the University of Oregon will host a conference in Eugene that explores the history and future of our food system with a focus on three themes: community, equity, and sustainability. Conference highlights include talks by Vandana Shiva, Fred Kirschenmann, and Darra Goldstein, along with an art exhibition and sustainable food fair. Invited speakers include national policymakers, nonprofit leaders, and farmers, as well as scholars in anthropology, literary and cultural studies, law, ethics, environmental studies, plant genetics, soil sciences, geography, sociology, agriculture, marine biology, and visual art. The conference is free and open to the public to attend, as space allows.

The conference aims to share research across disciplines; build opportunities for collaboration among scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and activists; connect Eugene's food and agriculture community to national and international groups; investigate regional food movements and social networks; and consider the particular roles of women, indigenous groups, and youth in the history and future of farming.

For more information visit the conference Web site at http://waynemorsecenter.uoregon.edu/food-justice/; or follow the Twitter feed at http://twitter.com/foodjustice2011.