Here’s how we cooked while writing this editorial letter for *Gastronomica*

We write across vast distances of space, time, and seasons. Signe is in Cape Town, South Africa. Approximately 28,000 kilometers (17,500 miles) and six time zones north and west, Dan writes from Charlevoix, Quebec, a nine-hour drive from his home in Toronto, across provincial borders that have only recently been reopened after pandemic lockdowns. Like Cape Town, Toronto spent much of the last year in some form of lockdown. Sheltering in place, Dan and his family longed to be somewhere else. They traveled to Quebec to eat local. Meanwhile, Signe and her family remained in Cape Town waiting for their turn in the vaccination queues, warmed by stews of Karoo lamb simmered with Italian tinned tomatoes and some of the finest Cape red wines—the latter finally available to enjoy again after crippling alcohol bans which still have local industries reeling from an extended absence of international travelers and sales. (South Africans do drink a lot, but not enough—or expensively enough—to keep a world-renowned wine region afloat, especially when local trade is also immobilized.)

Distance matters in food (and in collaborative writing). The experience of distance and its politics and poetics is threaded throughout the divergent pieces of this issue. Articles move from expensive restaurants to prisons, tracing the global and the local, and where they intersect. Together, they reveal liminal and in-between spaces where crucial but often overlooked operations like food banks and ghost kitchens exist. Peering into such spaces offers new perspectives on where, what, and how we eat and who brings our food to the door. From delivery to global supply chains, the articles that populate this issue are about space, difference, and the shifting meanings of borderlines.

Over the last few years of editing this journal, we’ve enjoyed reading *Gastronomica* cover to cover. Startling comparisons and connections appear. Curating this issue, for example, we read submissions ranging from topics such as eating in a Florida penitentiary, middle-class homes in Bangalore that came to rely on the services of delivery apps during lockdown, and the fiftieth anniversary of a restaurant that could be called a temple to locality: Alice Waters’s Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California. Together, these articles explode the binaries and semantics of here versus there, immobility versus mobility. Hardly opposites, they are deeply entwined. The rarefication of local food over the last half century since the founding of Chez Panisse often demands the long-distance travel of diners excited by the opportunity to eat from Waters’s backyard, so to speak. In similar ways, the stasis of those able to stay at home during the COVID-19 pandemic depends on the mobility of many others. (One consequence of the widespread looting in several
provinces in South Africa in July of 2021 was a disruption in basic services such as post offices, where many unemployed citizens collect the social aid grants they depend on to feed their families. Meanwhile, the South African Restaurant Association was lobbying for a relaxed curfew to allow restaurants to stay open for just one additional hour—till 10 p.m. rather than 9 p.m.—which would allow paying customers to order that additional bottle of wine or round of shots that ensure larger tips for servers and a less frantic commute home for all staff before the nightly enforcement of immobility.

Finally, this issue offers something new from Gastronomica’s Editorial Collective—two invitations to new kinds of scholarship and creative writing: culinary translations and food activism. Inspired by extraordinary work already in the journal, such as John Daimoku Kingham’s powerful portrait of how food systems have changed in one of Florida’s many prisons, Josée Johnston, Koby Song-Nichols, and Michael Chrobok invite submissions addressing food justice and activism on behalf of the “Food Phenomena” cluster of the Collective, while Eric C. Rath delineates the value and urgency of new translations related to the world of cooking, dining, and eating as scholarly contributions to the journal and food studies in general. (All calls for submissions are also available at www.gastronomica.org.)

In “Uncontrolled Movements: An Overview of Abdicated Control in Florida’s Prison Food Spaces,” Kingham offers a rare glimpse behind walls designed to control freedom and mobility, but internally governed by strict hierarchies of privilege and access. A food system brings food inside the prison where locality is a sentence measured in years and decades. In the prison cafeteria, incarceration collides with institutional, privatized food systems to produce a locale of tension and violence. It is in the cafeteria that the carceral imperative to control bodies has, paradoxically, over time, produced “near chaos.” Forced immobility provokes confrontations among inmates, guards, and private food service contractors: forced immobility at the end of a long supply chain. That friction produces hierarchies of value—chicken, writes Kingham, is the “undisputed king” of the prison cafeteria.

In his essay “Adirondack Mountain Oysters,” Luke McNally brings a “Bourdain ethos” from the mountains of Wyoming, where taking pleasure in eating parts of an animal most urban dwellers may reject is not only encouraged but expected. Locality, here, is the privilege of eating in place. For Amy B. Trubek, in “Why I Am Mad about the Ducks,” it is the vicissitudes of a supply chain that can turn once-precious commodities into discards, if there are simply too many of them (ducks, in this case), which makes her angry. Is eating local a fetishization of immobility? (Plenty of ducks are raised, cooked, butchered, and eaten in Charlevoix; the commodity and the knowledge are part of the food system, but in a sparsely populated part of an already sparsely populated province, delivery apps don’t work. We don’t need them. There’s duck and blood sausage from a family farm with roots in the generations of Basque migrants to this region who came to process whales from the Gulf of St. Lawrence into oil for European lamps. There’s a farm that raises local saffron, sold by the ounce to the fancy restaurants in Montreal and Quebec City promising local food to customers well aware of global food practices and trends. There are local strawberries on the roadside. The local sturgeon fishery begins in a day or two.)

Immobility, enabled by a global food supply chain to prisons, can be punishment. In the context of a pandemic, it is a privilege. Tulasi Srivianis’s “Swiggy It!; Food Delivery and the Shifting Meaning of Local in Pandemic India” details the success of a Bangalore-based “gastro app” that mobilized (mostly) migrant delivery workers to the homes of middle-upper-class Indian families who could afford to order in during the
lockdowns of 2020. One person’s immobility — shelter from the pandemic — is enabled by a hypermobility. Thus, the consumer’s choices are splayed out online, alongside the body temperature of those preparing food for delivery. A safe meal at home in Bangalore is enabled by someone else’s mobility. In a striking comparison, the prison and home food delivery reveal the food technologies that enable, in varying degrees, the control of bodies. For Cheryl Cheung, the fact of products on the move increased their value and enhanced their taste. In “Playing with Our Food,” Cheung explores yet another set of boundaries with her risograph-inspired depictions of the iconic American foods she enjoyed as a child in Hong Kong, fascinated by Kellogg’s boxes with pictures rather than “boring” fruits and vegetables with no manufactured aesthetic or imagined proximity to Hollywood and comic books. Childhood memories are more painfully recalled in Joel Rodrigues’s “Classical Dishes, Taste and Violence.” An instruction to MasterChef contestants to stay “classic” reminds the author of how high the price was for violating expectations in his own household, typically paid for by his mother at the hand of an abusive husband. Rodrigues’s eventual move to Northeast India, far from his childhood home, and the freedom to improvise with his mother’s (enforced) “classical” versions is therefore an expression of both liberty and longing.

Rodrigues’s mother crossed lines in search of the familiar spices that marked local food. Quite literally, she crossed the railroad lines, but in so doing, Rodrigues suggests, she also crossed lines of language, class, and gender—and, as well, paid the price for crossing her husband. Politically conscious cooking both reinforces and challenges the lines on the plate of language, region, class, even the senses. As the first English translation of Goshu no nikki, Eric C. Rath’s Sake Journal crosses language boundaries to bring the earliest guide to sake brewing in medieval Japan (1192–1600) to Gastronomica readers, and with it, the role of fermentation, scientific progress, and the slow passages of dissemination and popularization that so many of us now take for granted thanks to the digital mobilities of a “globalized” world that (reasonably or not) expects to find this ancient wine on any cosmopolitan menu.

We recognize the implicit contradictions in our own work, too, as efforts to transgress boundaries can simply amplify them. We are an English-language journal that consciously writes about world foods; in this issue, alone, we are on the move, with submissions about (and, for some, from): Hong Kong, India, Italy, Japan, and (inevitably) various parts of the United States. And, those submissions are, digitally mobilized to, from, and between South Africa and Canada.

For Monica Rico, measuring ingredients for bread dough takes on new significance. Measuring the pinch or the fraction of the teaspoon that feeds a dough introduces a tension between a grandmother’s advice on breadmaking and the exactness of a cooking school recipe. Can the elasticity of a healthy, fermenting dough reconcile memories of home cooking and the experiences of professional cookery? Evoking the splatters and stains on the sleeves of her chef whites, Rico’s poems are brilliantly tactile, giving new significance to elasticity as a means to stretch across the lines between home and professional cooking. In his photo essay, complemented as well by poetry, David Szanto recognizes the discomfiting lines measured by sensory perception. We may not fully “see” food in its global mobilities, but is there, perhaps, just a narrow band in which we can recognize the commodity as edible and comforting? Szanto reminds that scale, like language, matters, as it disrupts our sensory understandings. Focusing in closely, our edible recognition of food blurs into patterns and landscapes. Szanto’s remarkable images sensorially disaggregate food not only from systems of edibility but also from their local contexts. What does the local really look like, taste like, smell like up close?
Locality entwines itself around global food systems. (In Charlevoix, the gin is distilled from heritage grain raised on an island in the middle of the St. Lawrence estuary where the big grain ships carry wheat from prairies around the world. We mix local gin with French vermouth and lemons from somewhere subtropical. When relatives come from Toronto to visit, they bring their own spices to flavor a biryani made with local duck. It produces its own boundaries and borderlines. An escape to the country for weeks of hyperlocal cooking doesn’t mean an escape from either a global pandemic or the global food system. We wear masks to the supermarket. Alice Waters would like Charlevoix.) As much as a generation of cooks, inspired by Alice Waters, imagined a good food revolution and, ultimately, inspired one of our authors to slice and fry mountain oysters, locality comes with its privileges. In “An Education of the Senses at the University of California Berkeley,” Waters reveals the range of influences to Cari Borja on the fiftieth anniversary of Chez Panisse, citing everyone from anti-war activist Mario Savio to pedagogue Maria Montessori, that shaped the restaurant and her Edible Schoolyard initiative. Members of the Editorial Collective then shared their own reflections on Waters and Chez Panisse. Our responses might agree on the significance of Waters in articulating a slow-food politics, but varied as they brought attention to questions of the classism of local foods and its role in the current food system.

In “Food Activism and Language in a Slow-Food Italy Restaurant Menu,” Carole Counihan reads the menu given to delegates to the Slow Food National Chapter Assembly in 2009. Her method, recognizing food for its linguistic and material qualities, offers novel understandings of how language, in its original and in translation, shapes the politics of a global movement focused on the local. She asks whether “alimentary language” can, in fact, produce a politics that transforms a food system?

Finally, Collective member Jaclyn Rohel’s interview with Kim Walker and Mark Nesbitt about their book on the history of tonic water (broadcast as the launch episode of a new “What to Read Now” feature on our podcast on Heritage Radio Network earlier this year) offers a fascinating history of botany, empire, and alcohol. With its focus on quinine (extracted from the cinchona bark, and historically used as an antimalarial remedy during colonial exploits), this conversation also brings together the themes of borders, boundaries, locality, and difference collectively explored by the articles in this issue.

We write this as the megaship Ever Given has just completed its first passage through the Suez Canal after blocking that channel for six disastrous days in March 2021. For many people around the world (these editors included), watching those six days of immobility was both a virtual escape from the constrictions of our own lockdowns as well as an education in just how much the world depends on the free flow of goods, from bananas to sheep to the devices on which we type these words. Still, we continue to depend most crucially on the mobilities that we have not created—even if not as spectacular as a 400-meter-long container ship holding up the world’s traffic. The cover of this issue features artichoke plants “gone to seed” from Alice Waters’s Edible Schoolyard in 2015. It is an image of a season, rather than an end. Each seed is attached to ingenious sails, carrying them to new locales. They re-grow—a metaphor for organic mobility for a food movement. So, too, we hope for a food movement that is active, just, and mobile in all the right directions.

—Daniel E. Bender and Signe Rousseau, for the Gastronomica Editorial Collective, Toronto and Cape Town, September 2021