The juxtaposition of the nude body with food has always fascinated me. Don’t carrot sticks look more inviting when framing a nipple? And what about a glimpse of hair behind the mesh of a hot-dog apron? Our reactions to familiar foods change entirely when the food is displayed on a naked body. By shifting the context from plate to torso, the food, unsurprisingly, becomes sensuous and eroticized. At the same time, the connotations of each costume are radically expanded.

Sometime in 1972 I began asking myself what would happen if I explored the synthesis of food and clothing by constructing costumes that could actually be eaten. This edible element seemed a natural extension of the costumes I had already been making for several years. An essential component of this performance would be the public consumption of the clothing. First the models would sample each other’s clothes, then we would invite the audience to participate. During the course of the performance the elaborate garments would disappear, leaving only memories (and, of course, a few photos). The primary artistic elements would be the ephemeral composition of all the costumes together, the observation of their disintegration through eating, and the lingering sense of gustatory titillation.

The idea of performing nude in public was only slightly provocative in the early 1970s, at least in the art world. Nude performance reflected the counter-culture ideal of the body as a manifestation of the beautiful and a way of questioning the status quo. Of course, there was also a touch of exhibitionism. Still, I was definitely pushing the envelope when I asked my models to wear only food and then allow an audience of strangers to eat their “clothes.” To my surprise, many of my friends enthusiastically volunteered.

My first food costumes were presented on June 28, 1972, at the Jack Glenn Gallery in Corona del Mar, California. For Costumes Constructed and Eaten I designed a fashion show of costumes that were either totally or partially edible. After some initial experiments, I concluded that the costumes would become visually monotonous if they were 100 percent edible. However, if I were to attach food to net-like structures, then the range of design possibilities would grow.

Several weeks before the performance, my mother, Dorothy Browdy Kushner, and I began to crochet one-size-fits-all, unisex foundation garments. The gender dislocation of a man engaged in “women’s work” like crochet and food preparation appealed to me. At that time transgressive challenges to gender stereotyping were definitely in the air, and they had already become a motif in my artistic production.

In designing the foundations, it soon became clear that the human body has only a certain number of points from which heavy objects, like vegetables, could be attached without discomfort or elaborate dressmaking techniques that were beyond my level of skill. The head, shoulders, elbows, wrists, waist, knees, and ankles provide points of support and connection. As my mother and I crocheted together, usually in the backyard, I began to plan which foods to use with each costume, where they would be attached, and, most significantly, at what point in time they would be applied.

Since I approached the costume designs from the viewpoint of sculpture, I tried to ensure that the garments made an innovative statement in combination with the human form. Did the shapes of the costumes create unexpected lines across the exposed skin? Might they reveal what is usually hidden (crotches, breasts, buttocks) and occasionally obscure that which is usually displayed (the face, hair, hands)? Could each costume, combined with the support of its model, function as a piece of kinetic sculpture?

To plan the various phases of applying the vegetables, I sought models and situations involving food beyond the realm of art. I began by recalling my mother’s menu planning and preparation for the large parties she threw every few years. Days before the party, she would construct radish rosettes or slivered carrot and celery sticks, keeping them in jars of water in the fridge, where the vegetables would morph into sea-creature shapes. I remember as a child both how strange they looked and how long they would remain fresh. For my project, longevity was essential. I also considered another worldly source: the Tournament of Roses Parade. Growing up near Pasadena and loving flowers, I was obsessed with the monumental effort of bringing thousands of fresh flowers together for the one sustained moment of the parade itself. Friends of mine helped decorate the floats, so I knew that the decorations all came together in three days, starting with the heartiest flowers, usually chrysanthemums,
and ending with the easily bruised orchids at the last possible minute. I applied both of these paradigms.

That summer was a time of rather humorous trial and error. For these first costumes, it seemed a good idea to restrict myself to vegetables, a surprising number of which were unusable for various reasons. Boiled baby potatoes would have been good to eat and would look like enormous pears, but they tended to crack and fall right off the string at the slightest jostle. Uncooked ziti, barely ingestible at best, cracked and crumbled under pressure. Red or green cabbage leaves, particularly the outer ones, looked great and covered a large surface area, but they were basically inedible. Raw collard greens presented the same problem, but I used them anyway. Most fruits were too squishy or too quickly became bruised and unappetizing. Zucchini was tempting, both for its color and shape, but raw ones split too easily, and cooked ones fell right off the string. Lettuce and spinach would be appealing and palatable—but both wilted far too fast. Raw broccoli and cauliflower behaved well, held on the string, and were agreeable to eat, but they produced a lumpen, leaden look, like rows of rocks. String beans proved surprisingly resilient. Heads of fennel were a graceful choice. Ideas and research marched blissfully and madly on.

I began to formulate a battle plan for the construction of my edible garments. First I would stitch the costumes from the sturdiest veggies: carrots, celery, radishes, and string beans. When this first step was completed, I wrapped the vegetables in wet paper towels, put them in plastic bags, and tucked them to bed in the fridge. Next I strung less perishable foods, such as kumquats, olives, and cranberries. Last of all came the most fragile produce. The tools for this entire project were classically simple and low-tech: large carpet needles, a variety of thread and string, pliers to guide the needles through the tougher vegetables, and a knife for slicing, paring, and shaping. I used various sewing and embroidery techniques—simple stringing, patterned stringing, blind-stitching, over-stitching, hem-stitching—to create as many different uses of the vegetables as possible.

Our suburban grocery store assumed new relevance. For this show, most of the fifteen costumes were carefully planned; others were more extemporaneously constructed. I made schematic drawings for most of the costumes and followed them rather carefully. I knew that I needed considerable help to finish all the work in time for the performance. Echoing the communal efforts of my friends working on the Rose Bowl Parade floats, I invited the models to an undressed dress rehearsal in my parents’ suburban backyard. I had no idea how long it would take to make the costumes or how well they would hold up in performance. On the day of the performance the models also arrived several hours early to help finish and embellish their own costumes.

Before the performance began, the costumes were displayed as inanimate and perishable sculptures attached with pushpins to the walls of the gallery. The audience circled through the gallery, looking at the lush, deflated objects that would soon take sculptural form upon the models’ bodies. At a prearranged time, fifteen models dressed in street clothes also arrived several hours early to help finish and embellish their own costumes.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY STANLEY STELLAR © 2004
a delicate balance between light humor and seriousness, to be sexy but not gross.

There was one unanticipated problem: visibility. The gallery was rather full of a quilt exhibition that blocked an overall sense of vista. However, since the ingredients and design details of the costumes were etched in my mind, it was easy to pull individual models to the center of the room and spontaneously describe what they were wearing in a hybrid of fashion and kitchen terminology. A circle of interested viewers formed as I pointed out the details of each ensemble. For example: “An afternoon hat. A metal grill with green onions, black licorice whips, crookneck squash, strands of Cheerios, Froot Loops, Kaboom, and Sirgrapefellow [all breakfast cereals of the day], worn with a string bean cummerbund—suitable for brunches.” The narration was a successful focusing device that allowed me to emphasize the individuality of each costume. Then the performers turned to eating. First the models tasted each other’s garments, adding salad dressing and condiments as desired. Soon the audience joined in, with gusto. When the models felt that they had worn their costumes long enough, they were free to return the half- (or more) eaten costume to the wall and put on their street clothes again. True to California at that time, three or four audience members spontaneously stripped and tried on some of the costumes after the models had finished. At the end of the evening, I was pleased to see that a goodly amount of the food had actually been eaten.

The following fall I moved to New York and landed a job as a dessert chef at Food, an artists’ restaurant in newly emergent, as-yet-unnamed SoHo. Both the menu and the chefs changed daily, so my knowledge of food expanded radically. By the end of the fall I was co-managing the restaurant and learning a lot about exotic food preparation and a wide range of non-vegetarian ingredients. I was invited to present a revival of the California food show at Robert Stearn’s loft, Acme Productions, in association with The Kitchen, a cutting-edge performance space. Bob Kushner and Friends Eat their Clothes was performed on December 10, 1972.

Before leaving Los Angeles, I had removed the remaining vegetable bits from the crocheted foundations, which I brought to New York. I knew I could replicate the California costumes, but I was ready to create new pieces that would taste better and offer greater visual complexity. I created sixteen new costumes for this performance. The California food show had been vegetarian (as was I at that time), with the exception of a hot-dog apron. For the New York food show, I wanted to consider a wider range of ingredients that reflected the broader spectrum of foods I was cooking and eating at Food. In the first food show, I had not considered including cooked vegetables. Raw beets on a string are pretty gnarly and unappetizing no matter who is wearing them. But by cooking them first, I got a wild new food color (fuscia) and an earthy, mellow taste. Inspired by the beets, I designed a calves-tongue necklace: a kind of choker of three cooked, pickled calves tongues interspersed with halved, cooked beets. The necklace was modeled with a kitchen knife, which fit into a home-baked holster of bread. I accessorized the ensemble with a mustard dispenser, a huge escarole wig, and a pair of pita chops to complement the Western theme of the holster. I don’t think anyone ate any of the tongue—in fact, the necklace ultimately looked a little gross, even though my friend Ned modeled it to memorable effect.

“Velveeta Epaulettes” was one of my most successful costumes. Simply picturing the words “Velveeta” and “epaulettes” is enough to conjure the essence of the ensemble. Completing the “Velveeta Epaulettes” was a pita-bread mini-skirt punctuated by a marvelously deflated, baked eggplant codpiece and matching pita bedroom slippers. Footwear made of bread products provided dramatic new design horizons.

A sardine and anchovy necklace was shown with a Jewish rye bread mini-vest. The model’s addition of a half-pita Nehru cap over his long, curly hair, combined with the oily residue of the sardines on his chest, created a racy mixed metaphor of hedonism and Salvation Army.

I found that apricot leather, a Middle Eastern snack, is strong and supple enough to substitute for real leather. It can be sewn with either string or long red licorice whips. Its only sartorial drawback is its extreme stickiness, particularly under hot lights. Since I could not buy any large pieces of fruit leather, even in Brooklyn’s Middle Eastern stores, I made my own. It turned out lumpy, but I was able to work it into a delicious wrap-around sarong, worn with a vast wig of pressed orange halves (courtesy of the juice bar at Food).

My friend Deborah, an earnest meditator, asked for “something suitable for a woman of serious spiritual pursuit.” I thought about her reasonable request and decided that covering her breasts and privates would be the solution. What to cover breasts with? Hollowed pineapples sewn into a bikini would echo the tropical excesses of Carmen Miranda’s movie costumes and leave Deborah’s personal parts well concealed. What I neglected to consider was how monumentally enhanced Deborah became with a pair of projectile pineapples cantilevered from her rib cage. After the initial shock, she agreed to model her pineapples with a lady-apple off-the-shoulder halter, a chestnut and cranberry tiara, and a skirt of apple and pink grapefruit slices. She looked simultaneously demure and flamboyant.
I managed to enlist as many friends and relatives as possible to help me cut and sew. For three days before the show I took time off from work to buy and assemble as much as I could in advance. The models all came early and assisted enormously. Their improvised additions made the costumes in this performance some of the best I ever showed.

Alexandra Anderson-Spivy described the New York performance:

Having attended this performance, I can attest that any artist who produced such an event in the 1990s would provoke the wrath of the censorship brigade and the withdrawal of any National Endowment for the Arts funding (which the performance actually received, as did several of Kushner’s other pieces). That evening an audience of about one hundred, mostly downtown types, put a dollar apiece into the glass jar that served as a cash register, then wandered into the loft, took seat cushions, and arranged themselves on the floor... Every ornately constructed piece, which the audience was supposed to consume at the end of the performance, illustrated the irreverent attitude toward materials Kushner had revealed in his earliest collages. As each confection emerged, the audience first exhibited blasé skepticism, then charmed surprise, and finally gleeful hilarity... Those who had expected something sexually titillating were treated to inventive humor and gentle Eros in a format that poked fun at artistic pretension while it simultaneously parodied and celebrated the creativity of fashion... Wanting the use of nudity to evoke an empathic recognition from the audience, he chose a range of ordinary body types that were not necessarily “professionally beautiful.” Embedded in these performances was the implicit intent to address the meaning of several levels of transformation as well as the hypothetical question of how daily life might be different if people wore such arrays to the store, to meetings, or to parties... Kushner deployed humor as an antidote to cultural disillusionment and used it to subvert the pomposity of the avant-garde.2

Thinking I needed to round up an audience beyond word-of-mouth, I made the mistake of calling the Village Voice, which was at that time a prime resource for anything new or provocative in New York. They ran a sly, sexy preview about the performance that attracted an overflow crowd: “There’ll also be an eclectic collection of broccoli skirts, ravissante dresses of lettuce and cabbage and celery ensembles. For a contribution of $1.00, the audience will see a full-length fashion show, after which the models will begin to devour one another’s costumes. And for the piece de resistance, the spectators can join the pique-nique. All in good taste, of course.”3

Hundreds of people showed up. We accommodated two hundred and turned as many away. The crowd was lively and quite ready to be entertained, but I had underestimated how different the New York audience would be from its laid-back California counterpart. There were many cameras in the audience, and at my invitation a video crew was present.

Pineapple Falsies, displayed at Robert Kushner and Friends Eat their Clothes, New York, 1972.
The atmosphere of the room was highly charged. I came out dressed in a scallion mini-skirt and a trio of graduated mushroom necklaces, holding a handful of note cards with my narration. I began to model and describe my costume in the small runway area we had marked off in the middle of the room. The other models followed one at a time. While I read, they walked down the runway, demonstrating the various ingredients and features of their costume. They then took places around the edge of the room until all of the costumes had been shown, after which we gathered in the middle of the room to dine on our clothes.

The eating part of the performance in California had been celebratory and communal. By contrast, with our advance publicity and confinement in a crowded SoHo loft, audience participation in New York took on a slightly carnal edge, and many of the performers beat a hasty retreat to the dressing room. During the performance a lot of food fell to the floor and was wasted. This degree of profligacy disturbed me, and I decided there should be a more responsible endgame for my next food performance. For a while I considered the idea of performing on a runway in a restaurant, with huge pots of broth ready to receive the uneaten vegetables. The audience would then enjoy a delicious soup as the last act of the performance. In reality, I never did such a large performance again. I began looking for ways to continue making food costumes, but not on such a grandiose scale.

Harper’s magazine asked for a photo story on one of the food costumes, which I viewed as an opportunity to concentrate on a single costume and make it as detailed and lavish as I could. “Asparagus Vest” consisted of a plunging V-neck blouse of raw asparagus spears with twin chokers of Italian salami and radishes. The vest was accented by parsley earmuffs joined by a string of radishes. The ensemble was completed with a floor-length train of strung scallions. The writer for Harper’s recorded: “Ten minutes later, Robert is chopping with a floor-length train of strung scallions. The writer for Harper’s conventionally end a fashion show with a bridal ensemble, and I followed this tradition. My bridal outfit was designed for both the bride and groom. I depicted them in virginal innocence, strewn with bananas, strawberries, and daffodils in matching bandoliers and mini-skirts. For this show, the descriptive texts had become more baroque:

A three piece carrot suit for the first day at the beach. Carrots are quartered lengthwise and double stitched in a classic Chanel rounded neckline interspersed with radishes and falling to a becoming elbow length. A complementing strand of carrots here combined with cross slices of red cabbage hangs low at the waist. The ensemble is completed with a spring day hat of fresh dill in bunches and carrot ear guards. Quelle glamour.

I liked the controlled, finished aspect of each costume. But showing them in a room of suited patrons sipping white wine created a strangely distant experience, as there was no audience interaction. We were separated from our viewers and consequently ended up feeling like the hired help, sampling our own costumes but missing participation from our remote audience. I realized another element of the formula that had made the earlier extravaganzas so successful—a sense of parity between performer and viewer. On more equal ground, the audience can be free to be both voyeuristic and sympathetic, making the performer-viewer contact more open-ended, piquant, and enjoyable for everyone.

In 1980, the Philadelphia Institute of Contemporary Art invited me to create a performance and installation for one of the large corner windows of Wanamaker’s Department Store. Nakedness felt too provocative for such a publicly exposed street-corner location. Besides, I was tired of nudity as my performance trademark. I decided instead to explore a different social convention, high tea. At a tea the focus

falls equally on what one is wearing and what one is served. For Hats for Tea, May 1–8 1980, I sat in the store window creating hats out of found objects, feathers, a Frisbee, plastic leaves, dried gourds, and other ephemera. I did not use any fresh food items, though in retrospect that would have been interesting. At a certain hour in the afternoon, I set a tea table using food from Wanamaker’s gourmet shop, a microwave and dishes from Housewares, and a tablecloth from Linens. All of these objects, even the clothes and shoes I wore from Menswear, bore small signs indicating where in the store they could be purchased. If people were observing me from the street, unsure of what was going on in the normally uninhabited window, I invited them to join me for tea, using a microphone that startled many passersby. To accept my invitation, my guests had to thread their way through a thicket of men’s suits. Everyone was required to wear a hat for tea, either one of their own or one of the strange ones I had made that morning. Occasionally, friends and relatives joined me for the high tea, a variety of cookies and pastry, crackers, cheeses, and sardines. It made friends and relatives join me for the high tea, a variety of the strange ones I had made that morning. Occasionally, their way through a thicket of men’s suits. Everyone was required to wear a hat for tea, either one of their own or one of the strange ones I had made that morning. Occasionally, friends and relatives joined me for the high tea, a variety of cookies and pastry, crackers, cheeses, and sardines. It made for a good series of afternoon gatherings, with unexpected and witty conversation, as one would expect at tea.

In 1994 I wrote an article, “Life In the Produce Aisle,” for an issue of Art Journal that was dedicated to the subject of clothing as art. I realized that my photographs of the original costumes had nearly always been performance documentation. Documentation may capture the energy and ambiance of a performance, but it cannot fully convey the textures, details, and nuances of the costumes. I had always wanted to work with a studio photographer and professional models to see if good lighting and greater attention to detail would make the photos look as ambrosial and irresistible as I knew the costumes to be. So I gradually reconstructed the early costumes, adding many new details, which more time allowed. The hot-dog apron became elaborated to three rows of wieners in graduated sizes. I had previously drilled small holes into the pumpkins, and once the model was tightly tied into his outfit I inserted long stems of dried wheat, not literally edible but seasonally symbolic. The ensemble was completed by a squash tam accented with more wheat, an apron of miniature Indian corn, and a dried wheat scepter. It was a savory fall ensemble, perfect for a midnight guest appearance, and my last editable performance costume.

During this time, I was asked to create a costume for a midnight fashion show to be held on October 11, 1994, at the Dada Ball at Webster Hall, New York. For “Pumpkin Prom Dress” I dressed a model in a robust baby pumpkin bra and buttock cover surrounded by the leafy flourish of a collard-green mini-skirt. I had previously drilled small holes into the pumpkins, and once the model was tightly tied into his outfit I inserted long stems of dried wheat, not literally edible but seasonally symbolic. The ensemble was completed by a squash tam accented with more wheat, an apron of miniature Indian corn, and a dried wheat scepter. It was a savory fall ensemble, perfect for a midnight guest appearance, and my last editable performance costume.

Now, as I prepare this Gastronomica article, I have become intrigued by many forgotten, unrealized ideas and designs that I found in my old performance notes. One day, perhaps, I will have the opportunity to construct some of the following costumes: a Jell-O tutu (though I can’t yet figure out how it could be modeled except prone); a terribly adult anchovy/olive tapenade necklace; mignon caper anklets; a Swiss cheese and prosciutto vest; a Thai cellophane-noodle braided collar garnished with slivered scallions; string-bean sandals with pretzel spats; a watermelon muff; a chocolate marshmallow cookie tiara modeled with a glass of cold milk; a giant crepe coat; and, for brunch, a blueberry pancake poncho worn and served with pure maple syrup.

**Notes**