Food and sex are bedrock to the survival of the species and have been rocking in bed together for as long as they have kept all creatures great and small alive. Languages on several continents have words that mean both “to copulate” and “to eat.” The belief that certain foods can enhance sex and sexual function is as old as dirt and even messier. Which foods were believed to be aphrodisiacs, who used them, and why has depended upon the attitudes toward sex, procreation, pleasure, gender roles, religion, and class distinctions in any given time and place. The sticky subject of lewd food can therefore be penetrated through many different points of entry.

I believe that, underlying all the cultural constructs surrounding aphrodisiacs, the boundless enthusiasm for them through the ages ultimately represents humankind’s search for life’s essence, for a divine substance that, like gods and goddesses, has the power to beget and prolong life and that, like the foods ascribed to those divinities, grants energy, ecstasy, and immortality. This essay explores a variety of religious, medical, and scientific beliefs, some of which sound like divine comedies from our perch in the present.

Although we usually assume that people have always taken aphrodisiacs to help them have fun in the sack, the fact is that the most compelling reason to use them has been to make babies. Even foods that enhanced the pleasures of lovemaking were ultimately intended to seduce people into producing more offspring.

A kingdom’s fertility was often believed to depend upon the potency of its king. In lands as divergent as ancient India, China, and Peru, the rulers, regarded either as gods or as representatives of the divine, plowed the first furrow of the planting season, symbolic of mating with the earth goddess. In ancient Sumeria a ritual marriage was performed between the king and a fertility goddess in order to make crops grow. Egyptian pharaohs were supposed to conceive their heirs during the harvest festival of Min, god of cultivation and the generative power. Similar attitudes prevailed even in eighteenth-century France. A popular song about young King Louis xv trumpeted his virility as the mark of a good ruler:

What a man is our good king!  
Father of five children,  
At twenty years of age!  

[After dining,] this active, troubling, imperious sentiment is common to both sexes; it brings them together and unites them, and when the germ of a new life has been fertilized, the two people can again sleep in peace; they have fulfilled the most sacred of their duties in thus making sure that mankind will continue.

Aphrodisiacs designed to increase fertility and potency ensured immortality by increasing the chances of passing on one’s name, goods, and genes to one’s progeny—who one hoped would be male. That people would cherish love foods in earlier eras was partially influenced by the fact that they had a limited amount of time to be fruitful and multiply. In sixteenth-century Europe the average life expectancy was only twenty-five to thirty years. Furthermore, people believed that the extent of their fruitfulness influenced that of their orchards and fields, hence the widespread belief that childless women exerted a bad influence on crops and the practice in geographically distant cultures of appointing couples to copulate in the fields during or before planting.

Aphrodisiac Foods

Bringing Heaven to Earth

Right: *Yakshi amid a variety of aphrodisiac ayurvedic herbs, fruits, and medicinal plants.*

Painting by Miriam Hospodar
The fact that his doomed successor, Louis XVI, failed to consummate his marriage for almost eight years was interpreted as a sign of his inability to rule.

Love Feasts in Heaven

_They eat, they drink, and in communion sweet_

Quaff immortality and joy.

—Milton, _Paradise Lost_

Nectar and ambrosia on Mt. Olympus, soma in the Vedic heavens, mead in Valhalla, milk and honey in heavenly Jerusalem, and chocolate in Aztlán were divine nectars that imparted deathlessness and ecstasy. They were jealously guarded by the celestials; humans were not meant to be immortal and eternally euphoric. However, earthly foods that were sweet were believed to mimic these celestial draughts. They were also typically employed as aphrodisiacs to increase fertility and as tonics for energy and rejuvenation.

Humans have a special affinity for sweet-tasting foods; contemporary evidence suggests that it is innate, based on studies of infants’ universal preferences for sweetness over other flavors. We certainly associate love and sex with sweetness; we have sweethearts, sweeties, honeys, and sugar daddies and go on honeymoons, during which our love and lovemaking are supposed to be the most joyful, idealized, and intense. Although sugar was available in ancient China and India, where it was a sacred and aphrodisiac food, honey was the sweetest substance available in most of the ancient world. Considered a love food virtually everywhere it was found, honey was often described as a divine substance that fell from heaven. It was employed in religious rituals from the Dionysian mysteries of ancient Greece to _puja_, a Hindu ritual worship still performed today.

Milk, the first earthly food that we suckle from our mother’s body, was worshiped as the life force, as cosmic nourishment bestowed by the Mother Goddess. Paradise was frequently described as a place where honey drips from trees and milk pails overflow. The heavens sparkled with divine milk; “galaxy” and “Milky Way” were derived from the Greek word _gala_ (milk). Milk and dairy products were lauded for their aphrodisiacs, rejuvenating, and life-extending properties. All but one of _Kama Sutra_’s aphrodisiac recipes contain sugar, milk, honey, or clarified butter, an aphrodisiac food reputed to increase sperm, extend longevity, and cause exhalation. In perhaps the most evocative of sacred erotic allegorical imagery, the Hindu god Krishna was raised among a community of cowherds and milkmaids. When Krishna grew into an irresistibly attractive youth, the milkmaids would flee their homes to dance ecstatically with him under the full moon. He would then manifest as an individual lover for each woman, making love to her all night in exactly the manner she desired.

Along with a portion of the gods, aphrodisiacs often possess a bit of the devil. An Indian legend about garlic’s origins involves a jar containing the nectar of immortality that was hidden beneath the ocean. Gods and demons churned the sea until the vessel rose to the surface. The celestials succeeded in grabbing it first and quickly distributed the elixir amongst themselves. However, a demon disguised himself as a god and received a share of the potion. A divinity recognized the impostor and summarily beheaded him before he could swallow the nectar and become immortal. Garlic plants sprang up wherever drops of blood mixed with nectar fell to earth. For this reason, garlic was considered a powerful substance that must be used with caution, for it contained demon’s blood along with the elixir of immortality. (Cannabis, another time-honored aphrodisiac, also emerged from the spattered soil.)

Garlic is a more problematical aphrodisiac substance than milk and honey. It was deemed unfit to offer to the gods in ancient Egypt, and to this day Hindus and Chinese Buddhists do not use it in religious rituals. Ancient Egyptians and Greeks believed garlic promoted brute strength, appropriate for pyramid builders and galley slaves. Along those lines, it was also reputed to strengthen flagging libidos. _Kama Sutra_ contains this formula: “Mix garlic root with white pepper and licorice. When drunk with sugared milk, it enhances virility.” Across the sea tradition has it that garlic was rubbed on the infant guns of the future Henry IV of France to help him grow into a potent potentate. However, across the channel Culpepper’s 1652 _Herbal_ warned proper Englishmen, “Its heat is very vehement, and all vehement hot things send up but ill-favoured vapours to the brain.”

Sex and the Sea

The ocean has long been considered a sacred source of love foods. “Aphrodisiac” was derived from the name of the Greek goddess of love and sexuality, and Aphrodite rose from the foam surrounding the genitals of Kronos’s father, which had been severed and cast upon the waters. She was linked to food from the start. An Orphic Ode described her as the “patroness of the feasts which last for nights.” Homer extolled her, Here, the most magnificent, most charming Goddess escaped from the foam. Fragrant herbs shot forth from under her flying feet...
Today we might postulate that seafood excites lust because its aromas resemble human sex secretions and because it contains nutrients that support sexual function. However, the earlier rationale was that fish and seafood came from Aphrodite’s birthplace. Apuleius, the second-century Platonist philosopher and satirist, offered love potions concocted from seafood to a rich widow he wished to marry, stating that they “must necessarily have great efficacy in exciting women to venery, inasmuch as Venus herself was born of the sea.”

From a Darwinian perspective, the oceans are the source of all life on earth. Shells, ancient symbols of vulvas, were soaked in wine to make love draughts. Fish also symbolized the vulva, which was coined the vesica piscis (fish vessel). A fish, as emblems on car bumpers remind us, is a symbol of Christ, the fisher of men, who produced loaves and fishes—making a sacred food and an aphrodisiac one and the same yet again. Europeans believed that people were more lusty during Lent due to their fish diet. In Gargantua and Pantagruel Rabelais wrote, satirically, “No food is eaten that can prompt mankind to lascivious acts more than at that time.” Nicholas Venette (1633–1698) stated in Tableau de l’amour Conjugal, “we have observed that those who live almost entirely upon fish and shellfish…are more ardent in love than all others.” And Brillat-Savarin in The Physiology of Taste echoed that fish “acts strongly on the genetic sense, and awakes in both sexes the instincts of reproduction.” I rather like Sydney Smith’s observation that “soup and fish explain half the emotions of life.”

The shape, texture, and smell of oysters, a classic aphrodisiac, have been compared to both vulva and testicle. With all the illness and death through the ages attributed to eating oysters, I cannot help but think that their attraction involves a bit of the demon as well as the gods. The erotic dining scene in the film Tom Jones resembles a tryst described in Casanova’s memoirs, in which he pronounced oysters “a spur to the spirit of love” and ate them dressed with another aphrodisiac substance, saliva:

After making punch we amused ourselves by eating oysters, exchanging them when we already had them in our mouths. She offered me hers on her tongue at the same time that I put mine between her lips; there is no more lascivious and voluptuous game between two lovers….What a sauce that is which dresses an oyster I suck from the mouth of the woman I love! It is her saliva. The power of love cannot but increase when I crush it, when I swallow it.

The ancient Indian medical text, Charaka Samhita, contains one of my favorite aphrodisiac prescriptions: “If one is saturated with cock’s meat fried in crocodile semen, he does not get sleep at night and has penis ever stiffened.” Crocodile eggs, meat, and semen were considered powerful aphrodisiacs in the ancient Americas, Europe, and Asia. The Aztecs considered the flesh of a “terrifying lizard,” described by a Spanish translator as resembling crocodile meat, to be their most effective aphrodisiac. Makaradwaj (crocodile sex) is a complex alchemical aphrodisiac and longevity elixir still concocted in Nepal. Crocodiles are ancient, evocative animals, living in swamps that teem with life. They also have a sacred fertility aspect; Hindu and early Buddhist art abounds with images of makaras, celestial crocodiles who frolic in heavenly oceans and rivers. Yakshi, voluptuous nature deities with the power to bestow offspring on childless couples, ride upon makaras.

Nothing Says Lovin’ Like Something from the Oven

Bread is pregnant with symbolism and sensuality. Bread dough feels like warm living flesh. In a hot oven it grows like a swelling rounded belly. Today, we say that a woman with child “has a bun in the oven.” In the ancient world all the accouterments of growing grain and making it into bread were associated with fecundity. Archeologist Marija Gimbutas wrote of a pan-European mother goddess whose temples often featured bread ovens for altars: “Before she was the mother to domesticated grains, she was the mother to the wild plants. At the beginning of the Neolithic she was transformed into an agricultural goddess, the progenitor and protectress of the fruits of the land, but especially of grain and bread.”

Kama Sutra makes claims for a sweet-potato cookie that rival today’s e-mail spams for various potency drugs: Crush sweet potatoes in cow’s milk, together with swayamgupta seeds [Mukunia pruriens], sugar, honey and clarified butter. Use it to make biscuits with wheat flour….By constantly eating these biscuits, one’s sperm acquires such force that it is possible to sleep with thousands of women who, in the end, will ask for pity.

Gingerbread men were originally prepared by crones for lovesick women. They laced dough with ginger, believed to have aphrodisiac properties, then sculpted it to resemble the man for whom the lady lusted. When her beloved ate the cookie, his heart, and parts further south, would be enslaved to the damsel forever. (Should the happy couple marry, the bride and groom would doubtlessly ritually feed one another bread or cake.) Breads shaped like genitalia were also commonly employed in sex magic. Romans employed heterae,
sacred prostitutes, to bake coliphia, phallic-shaped breads. (Forno, Latin for “oven,” is the derivation of “fornicate.”) Similarly shaped loaves are described in old Teutonic histories.

Sex magic was also practiced by anointing a cake or bread with body secretions and feeding it to a lover. One such practice was graphically described by an outraged Buchard, the bishop of Worms, in his twenty-volume Decretal of Church morality: “Have you done what certain women are in the habit of doing? They prostrate themselves face downwards, rump upward and uncovered, and have a loaf of bread kneaded upon their nude nates; when it has been baked, they invite their husbands to come and eat it; this they do in order to inflame their men with a greater love for them.”

Seventeenth-century English diarist John Aubrey recorded that women would press pieces of dough against their vulvas, bake them, and offer them to the men they desired. Scientists today point out that the “magic” might have been powerful sex attractant pheromones in body secretions that were transferred to the breads.

“Piesexuality” is a term coined by Mike “Pieface” Brown, who holds annual nude pie-throwing parties in San Francisco. The fetish was considered worthy of inclusion in the International Encyclopedia of Sexuality, where psychologist Robert Francoeur comments, “Arousal comes from doing something with an attractive person who might not ordinarily be involved with you, doing something outside the norm, and humiliation.” I prefer to think that the arousal comes from the sensuality of a luscious, gooey pie caught full-on in the puss, or the pussy. But wait! A 1995 study conducted by neurologist and psychiatrist Alan Hirsch to determine the aromas most erotically stimulating to men revealed that the smell of pumpkin pie aroused his subjects more than any other fragrance tested.

Ancient Medical Systems and Aphrodisiacs

Aphrodisiacs have most often nestled in the arms of medicine, in whatever form medicine was practiced at a given time and place. Ayurveda, the heath-care system from India’s vast body of Vedic literature, widely influenced medical beliefs throughout the ancient world. Its vajikarana (vaji = “stallion”) branch was devoted to promoting fertility, virility, and sexual pleasure. Charaka Samhita states, “A conscious person should use aphrodisiacs regularly because virtue, wealth, pleasure, and fame depend on it. It also gives rise to male offspring, which is the resort [sic] of these qualities.” According to ayurveda, sexual fluids, sperm, and ova are manufactured by the body from food. Therefore, when these secretions are expelled during sex, aphrodisiac foods are necessary to replenish them. Such foods are mostly the heavenly nectars worshiped as the foods of the gods: “Whatever is sweet…and exhilarating is known as an aphrodisiac….The edibles prepared with raw sugar, sesame, milk, honey, and sugar are aphrodisiacs.” Panchamritam—“five immortals,” a mixture of milk, yogurt, sugar, honey, and ghee—is still prescribed to increase fertility, restore vitality, and promote longevity. It is also offered to the gods in Hindu temple rituals.

The early Islamic world embraced aphrodisiac foods for married men. Women were believed to be the more passionate sex, easily tempted by extramarital affairs. Muslim husbands were exhorted to keep their wives amply satisfied so that they would not stray from the path of righteousness. The Islamic sex manual, The Perfumed Garden, ca. 1410–1434, contains many aphrodisiac recipes for use by married men. Echoing the ayurvedic belief that both stamna and sperm are made from food, the text advises, “if a man will passionately give himself up to the enjoyment of cotion, without undergoing great fatigue, he must live upon strengthening foods…the quality of the sperm depends directly on the food you take.” One prescription is to eat twenty almonds and one hundred pine nuts chased by a glassful of thick honey for three successive days.

The traveler Ibn Battuta (1304–1377) described an aphrodisiac employed by “upright Muslim” inhabitants of an island near India:

Using honey and coconut, they prepare a type of mead that, in combination with certain fish that are their primary sustenance, bestows upon them a virility unlike any that can be found in any other people. The inhabitants of this island are capable of amazing things with their wives….As long as I stayed on this island, I had four rightful women, and was ready for them every day…for eighteen months.

The obsession with aphrodisiacs in China originally reflected Confucianism’s emphasis on male heirs and the Taoist pursuit of longevity. The origins of Chinese medicine were said to be divine, disseminated by the mythic Yellow Emperor. Potency and longevity were believed to increase when ch’i (life energy) was cultivated. It was also considered necessary to keep the primal dualities through which ch’i expresses itself—yin, the feminine principle, and yang, the masculine principle—in harmony. Diet was the primary method of balancing these energies. Foods were classified as either yin or yang and as either “hot” or “cold.” The oldest known sex manual, the first-century Classic of the Elemental Maid, declares,
The debility of men is caused by faulty ways in the mating of Yin and Yang...They that know the way are like a good cook, who can blend the five flavors into a tasty soup; they that know the Tao of Yin and Yang can blend the five pleasures. But they that know not may die an untimely death.

Rather than targeting specific symptoms and organs, Chinese aphrodisiacs addressed yang-shen (life-nurture) or long-term health and vitality, which in turn supported potency and desire. One ancient prescription was a mixture of ground nuts, peanuts, almonds, and dates (resembling a contemporary power bar), to be taken twice daily for virility and immortality.

The ancient medical systems of Asia, Egypt, and the Middle East were incorporated into those of ancient Greece and Rome, which, in turn, formed the basis of Renaissance European medicine. Galen’s influential first-century Materia Medica expressed the Roman interpretation of an ayurvedic concept: all life forms possess varying amounts of four “humors,” or vital qualities. Each humor was either hot or cold, or moist or dry. Physicians treated diseases with medicines that had opposite qualities, such as prescribing a cold herb to cure a hot disease. Renaissance Europeans further believed that all species on God’s green earth had been recorded and codified by the Greeks and Romans. After 1492 doctors were flummoxed when previously unknown new-world plants started turning up in Europe. These unclassified bits of herbage blew to bits the belief that the ancients knew everything there was to know about botany and medicine. European botanists and physicians quickly bit the botanical bullet and set to work categorizing the barrage of new-world plants according to the humors. Many new-world flora got the aphrodisiac label—or libel, as the case may be—from these Renaissance classifications.

Chocolate garnered its racy reputation in this way. True to aphrodisiac tradition, chocolate was one of Mesoamerica’s most sacred foods. Olmecs, Mayas, Toltecs, and Aztecs believed that cacao was a gift of the gods, and they used it mostly in sacred chocolate beverages. Although Mesoamericans had aphrodisiacs aplenty, we do not know for certain whether cacao was one of them. The only information we have comes from records of Spanish conquistadores, whose interpretations of Aztec life were colored by their own beliefs. Bernal Diaz del Castillo, who traveled with Cortez, started the titillating trend by reporting, “From time to time, gold cups were brought to him [Montezuma] containing a beverage made from cacao. It was said to have aphrodisiac properties, but,” del Castillo added piously, “we did not pay any attention to this detail.”

A medical theory in which Renaissance and Baroque physicians put great stock was the Doctrine of Signatures. Its late and herb beverage, was described in an Aztec Materia Medica compiled and written by the Spanish royal physician, Francisco Hernandez. Its erotic effects were thought to have come from an herb that modern botanists have yet to identify. Hernandez classified chocolate itself according to the humoral system, calling it “cool and moist” and able to “excite the venereal appetite” — and leaving us ignorant of what the Aztecs themselves thought about it.

Although Linnaeus (1707–1778) assigned the botanical name Theobroma cacao (food of the gods) to the cacao tree, other Europeans had been swift to label it a botanical slut. In 1624 Joan Franca Raucher condemned chocolate as “a violent inflamer of the passions” and advised that monks be forbidden to drink it. In 1651 Spaniard Antonio Colmenero wrote Chocolata inda opusculum (A Curious Treatise of the Nature of Chocolate), classifying cacao as “cold and dry” and claiming that it “vehemently incites to Venus, and causeth conception in women.” Royal Physician Henry Stubbes published The Indian Nectar, or a Discourse Concerning Chocolata in 1662. He wrote, “As chocolate provokes other evacuations through the several Emunctories of the body, so doth that of seed, and becomes provocative to lust upon no other account than that it begets good blood.” Stubbes prepared the drink for his notoriously randy patient, King Charles II, claiming that a cup of chocolate gave as much nourishment as a pound of beef. His tract also enlightens us about other aphrodisiac foods of his day:

Twill make Old women Young and Fresh;
Create New Motions of the Flesh,
And cause them to long for you know what,
If they but taste of chocolate.

Another Englishman, the aptly named James Wadsworth (1768–1844), optimistically observed in A History of the Nature and Quality of Chocolate,
The great use of Chocolate in venery, and for supplying the Testicles with a Balsam, or a Sap, is so ingeniously made out by one of our learned Countrymen already, that I dare not presume to add any Thing after so accomplished a Pen...; and I do not doubt but you London gentlemen do value it above all your cullises and Jellies, your Anchovies, Bononia sausages, your Cock and Lamb-stones, your Sovies, your ketchups and Caveares, your Cantharides [Spanish fly], and your whites of eggs.

The Doctrine of Signatures and Law of Similars

A medical theory in which Renaissance and Baroque physicians put great stock was the Doctrine of Signatures. Its
premise was that after Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden and humankind began to experience diseases, God mercifully gave each plant a visible sign, usually in the form of a resemblance to the part of the human body it could be used to treat. Some herbs and plants were labeled aphrodisiacs because they resembled genitalia. The most famous is mandrake, a member of the nightshade family. It has been credited with promoting desire and fertility since Leah used mandrake to charm Jacob into her bed in the Bible. Plutarch and Pliny the Elder both mentioned mandrake root’s resemblance to a penis and testicles. Others saw in its sometimes entwined double roots a pair of lovers in a passionate embrace. Other nightshades, including egg plants, chilies, tomatoes (called “love-apples”), and potatoes, were assigned aphrodisiac qualities through guilt by association with mandrake.

Mushrooms have long been considered aphrodisiacs because of their resemblance to penises. Witches’ toadstools may have begun their lives in love potions concocted by the village crones who were condemned as witches when Christianity dominated Europe. Psychedelic mushrooms have long been swallowed as ecstasy-producing aphrodisiacs. Aztec prostitutes kept them on hand for their customers. Truffles, while not fitting the bill for shape, were nevertheless a treasured aphrodisiac fungi. Modern science credits the mushroom’s reputation to androstenol, a sex-attractant pheromone. Some fungi, like the Golden Bough, were assigned aphrodisiac qualities through guilt by association with mandrake.

That Coryhaeus of voluptuaries, George xv [of England], so highly appreciated the aphrodisiac quality in truffles, that his Ministers at the courts of Turin, Naples, Florence, &c., were specially instructed to forward by state messenger to the Royal kitchen any of those fungi that might be found superior in size, delicacy or flavor...it being a positive aphrodisiac which disposes men to be exacting and women complying.

Thanks to the Doctrine of Signatures, vanilla has had a particularly quirky history. The long slender pods of a Mexican orchid reminded Spanish physicians of a sheath, which also encompassed the idea of a vagina. They named the plant vaina or vainillo, from “vagina”—never mind that orchis, the Greek root of “orchid,” means “testicles”! Vanilla thus became known as an erotic stimulant in Europe. When Madame de Pompadour’s maid scolded her for subsisting on an aphrodisiac diet of vanilla, truffles, and celery, Louis xv’s mistress confessed,

The fact is, my dearest, that I’m terrified of not pleasing the King any more, and of losing him. You know, men attach a great deal of importance to certain things and I, unfortunately for me, am very cold by nature. I thought I might warm myself up, if I went on a diet to heat the blood, and then I’m taking this elixir which does seem to be doing me some good.

It is ironic that “vanilla sex” is now an appellation coined by sadomasochists to describe non-S & M—e.g., bland and boring—forms of lovemaking.

A broader cross-cultural idea, tagged the Law of Similars by James Frazer in The Golden Bough, informed the belief that people could acquire virility by eating the flesh and sex organs of animals believed to have an abundance of that quality. A recipe in Kama Sutra states, “Ram’s or he-goat’s testicles boiled in sugared milk increase sexual prowess.” Louis xv and Madame de Pompadour supposedly ate ram’s testicles. (Such dinners represented the infancy of endocrinology, in which people ate glands that supplied them with hormones.) The dried penises and testicles of deer, tiger, seal, and beaver are used in Chinese sex tonics. Spotted gecko lizards, who mate for a full day, are caught in the act and then dried and soaked in wine. When I was living in Taiwan in 1985, a national scandal emblazoned the front pages for a week concerning the fates of several live Bengal tigers who had been imported by a group of men intending to eat their flesh for virility.

That eggs would be eaten for fertility and potency is an obvious association; they are a type of womb, and their yolks nourish their embryos. Eggs were sacred symbols of the earth’s regeneration in pagan spring equinox celebrations (which gave rise to the tradition of Easter eggs). The Perfumed Garden declares that “a man who eats three egg yolks daily will be sexually invigorated.” Furthermore, the color and texture of raw egg whites bear a resemblance to that of semen and vaginal secretions. Casanova frequently mentioned the use of egg whites as an aphrodisiac. During one erotic tryst he bantered with his favorite nun, “I have lived in celibacy for the past week, but I need to eat, for I have nothing in my stomach but a cup of chocolate and the whites of six fresh eggs which I ate in a salad...”

“You must be ill!” [she replied].

“Yes; but I shall be well when I have distilled them one by one into your amorous soul.” Casanova bantered on, using egg whites as a metaphor for his cum, which, by the end of the playful conversation, his lady held in her hand.
Body fluids in general send out conscious and unconscious siren songs through their flavors, temperature, and scents that are employed to this day in sympathetic magic. Blood is the quintessential liquid of life. People have ingested the blood of everything from bulls to blondes in the hope that it would increase strength, potency, and libido. Blood was one of the four humors, believed to possess innate qualities of strength and passion. Too much “heat” in the blood made people extremely passionate; we still call a highly sexual person “hot blooded.” In some early Mesoamerican cultures chocolate symbolized blood, and the cacao pod the heart, the source of life. Chocolate drinks were often dyed red with annatto to strengthen the connection. (Lest we think this savagely far flung from our own point of view, consider that we ply our lovers with bright red heart-shaped boxes of chocolates on Valentine’s Day.)

New York’s Vampire Sex Club hosts events in which participants drink each other’s blood. Though most of us might not relish being card-carrying members of that organization, vampires run riot through contemporary Western culture. Dracula and others of his ilk are highly sexualized, as in actor Frank Langella’s depiction of the Count on Broadway and in a subsequent movie and in Ann Rice’s erotic vampires. Carol Page comments in Bloodlust, “The infection of vampirism that Dracula passes with his bite is, in fantasy, falling in love, falling in love so deeply that one’s life has changed forever, transformation through passion.”

Menstrual blood has been considered a particularly powerful aphrodisiac. It is different from all other blood: it appears at regular intervals that are often aligned with lunar cycles; the bleeding does not weaken or kill the bleeder; and only women of childbearing age possess it. Ming Dynasty Emperor Shih Tsung (1522–1567) kept 400 young virgins on hand to supply menstrual blood for his longevity/aphrodisiac elixir. In Europe Virus amatorium was believed to be a component of menstrual blood that could increase sexual passion. Even some twentieth-century gynecology texts discuss a “menotoxin” located in menstrual blood. They are not far wrong: there is increasing evidence that trimethylamine, which gives menstrual blood its fishy smell, is an olfactory sex attractant.

Semen, another body fluid with life-giving power, has also been a time-honored ingredient in aphrodisiacs. Semen was long believed to be the primary substance in human reproduction, and the womb merely a vessel for it. Many Europeans believed that sperm contained a homunculus, a fully developed miniature human being. It was not until 1854 that doctors fully understood that women brought as much to the reproductive table as men. The ancient Chinese were more equitable. Women were credited with harboring larger amounts of ch’i and greater sexual capacities than men. They believed that in order to be healthy and live long, men, who are primarily yang, needed to drink women’s yin essence, including her sexual secretions, saliva, and any perspiration that appeared between her breasts during lovemaking. Chinese sex manuals were often concerned with giving a woman full satisfaction so that her body fluids would flow copiously. The best lovers were juicy, “like a peach.” Peaches symbolized the vulva and were known as the fruit of immortality. Chinese elders are still given peach-shaped steamed buns on their birthdays to celebrate their advanced age.

In Brazil it is customary to offer a guest a cup of café-inho, made by pouring boiling water over powdered coffee through a cloth strainer. Some young women employ sex magic by secretly straining coffee through their used panties and giving it to men they wish to marry. The belief is possibly African, brought to Brazil by slaves, because similar practices are found among blacks in the southern United States. Voudou priestesses prepare “binding poisons” by mixing a woman’s urine, underarm sweat, and vaginal secretions into coffee. Every time her man drinks it, he becomes more thoroughly enslaved to her.

Excrement was commonly added to European and Chinese aphrodisiacs. Pliny the Elder mentioned the aphrodisiac properties of feces. In the late seventeenth century aphrodisiac formulae containing feces received endorsement from the university faculty of Leipzig, Germany. Today, sex play involving feces is sometimes called “a fudge party,” and anal intercourse, “the Hershey highway.” In Essence and Alchemy Mandy Aftel writes,

It is truly the fecal essence of our most pungent bodily odors that draws us, even as it repels us. The precarious balance between arousal and disgust is sexual in its very nature, creating erotic tension and heightening arousal. It manifests itself in the pervasiveness of scatological references in folklore, superstition, and literature, and in the universality of coprolagnia—sexual practices that link human excretion with eroticism.

Excrement can also be viewed as a life-giving substance that fertilizes the soil and makes crops grow. During Dipavali, the Hindu holiday dedicated to the goddess Lakshmi, South Indian farmers worship the dung heaps they have collected to fertilize their fields with offerings of flowers, ghee lights, boiled rice, and fruits.

Aphrodisiac Foods of Intoxication and Euphoria
Foods that alter consciousness have been used throughout history to enhance lovemaking, allowing humans briefly to
The ayurvedic text *Astanga Hridaya* recommends, "At night, wine should be consumed twice or thrice, in little quantities just to please the woman." Evidently, it pleases the man as well, for "the person, who sitting in a secret place, keeping his wife on his lap, getting excited by squeezing her between the shoulders, making her sweat and shake her breasts, if he does not drink wine at least once, what else does he enjoy in this troublesome life?" According to the Koran, men who go to paradise recline on jeweled couches and quaff the wine that is forbidden to Muslims on earth. Heavenly wine never results in hangovers. Amorous delights are provided by the houris, "white ones" or "bright-eyed" maidens "with swelling breasts," who remain virgins no matter how many times men make love to them.32

Henry iv of France was said to have regularly downed some Armagnac before paying a call upon one of his many paramours. Hypocra, a popular medieval and Renaissance drink intended to stimulate as well as intoxicate, was a mixture of Burgundy wine, sugar, and an array of allegedly lust-promoting spices such as ginger, cinnamon, cloves, black pepper, and cardamom. It is described in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, where Rabelais reminds his readers that "Don Priapus was the son of Bacchus and Venus."

Although alcohol can induce heavenly intoxication, it also contains a bit of the demon when it comes to sex. The right amount blocks inhibitory nerves in the cerebral cortex of the brain, resulting in relaxation and loss of inhibitions. However, drinking beyond that point will cause a loss of motor coordination. As Shakespeare eloquently pointed out in *Macbeth*, "Lechery, sir, it provokes and unproves; it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance."

Stimulants are another source of a lusty high. They cause nerve fibers to release a flood of neurotransmitters, including noradrenaline, which produces the same feeling as an adrenaline rush. Kola nuts, which are chewed in much of tropical Africa, get their jolt from caffeine and theobromine. Stimulating qat leaves are enjoyed in the Middle East, and coca leaves, from which cocaine is extracted, are popular fare in the Andes. *Paan* is an Indian mixture that derives its mild buzz from areca, betel nuts combined with spices and sometimes tobacco, all rolled up in betel leaves. It is eaten after meals and before lovemaking. In China people also chew on areca nuts, which stain the mouth and teeth red. There are references in Indian and Chinese erotic literature to courtesans with reddened mouths from chewing betel. The twelfth-century Indian poet Bilhana wrote,

Even now I remember
Wine on the lip.
She innocently licked...
And her mouth spiced still
With camphor and areca.

Spices possessed the mystique of luxury, sensuality, and exoticism that elevated any food to a love drug, especially in spice-mad ancient Rome and medieval Europe. Spices were imported from faraway lands with hot climates and more open attitudes toward sex. Along with the celebration of their erotic powers came a belief in their dangers. Spanish explorer José de Acosta warned against the aphrodisiac qualities of chilies—distant cousins of mandrake—declaring them to be damaging to spiritual health. The belief persists. Following an epidemic of prison rapes in the 1970s, the Peruvian government banned chilies from penitentiaries, explaining that they were "not appropriate for men forced to live a limited lifestyle." Spices and condiments were held particularly suspect in nineteenth-century Europe and America. The 1843 German *Encyclopedia of Folk Medicine* by Georg Friedrich Most discusses "spice abuse," noting that "for children and young persons until their eighteenth, twentieth year, apart from salt and sugar, no spices (for they excite, stimulate, awaken sexual desire too early, thus providing the first occasion for masturbation and lead to excesses in sexual pleasure)." American health reformer John Harvey Kellogg agreed, adding that it was evidence of the debilitating act of masturbation if a person liked "unnatural" condiments such as salt, pepper, spices, vinegar, and mustard.

Among stimulants, coffee was uniquely considered an antiaphrodisiac. Turks called it "the black enemy of sleep and copulation." A thesis presented at the *Ecole de Médecine* in Paris in 1695 claimed that men and women who drank coffee on a daily basis lost their reproductive powers, while in *Aphrodisiacs and Anti-Aphrodisiacs* John Davenport quoted a distinguished British surgeon's declaration, "Any man who drinks coffee and soda water and smokes cigars may lie with my wife."35

In 1674 a remarkable document was published in London entitled "The Women’s Petition Against Coffee, Representing to Publick Consideration the Grand Inconveniences accruing to their SEX from the Excessive
Use of that Drying, Enfeebling LIQUOR.” It claimed that men were becoming “as unfruitful as the deserts, from where that unhappy berry is said to be brought” and that “the whole race was in danger of extinction.”

We find of late a very sensible Decay of that true Old English Vigour. …Never did Men wear greater Breeches, or carry less in them of any Mettle whatsoever. …[This is due to] the Excessive use of that Newfangled, Abominable, Heathenish Liquor called Coffee, which …has so Eunucht our Husbands, and Crippled our more kind gallants….They come from it with nothing moist but their snotty Noses, nothing stiffe but their Joints, nor standing but their Ears.

The counter-thrust was swift:

The Men’s Answer to the Women’s Petition…

Coffee collects and settles the Spirits, makes the erection more Vigorous, and the Ejaculation more full, adds spiritualascency to the Sperme…suitable to the Gusto of the womb, and proportionate to the ardours and expectations too of the female Paramour.34

Aphrodisiac Foods in the Age of Anxiety

Some of the old ways of sex magic and aphrodisiac preparations are being kept alive in alternative health-care systems, in counterculture religions and spiritual groups, and in the burgeoning sexual underground. However, things ain’t the way they used to be. Mainstream religion, medicine, food, and attitudes toward sexuality, which formerly were intertwined, have largely become estranged bedfellows. Gone from popular culture are sacred aphrodisiac foods bestowed by the divinities to grant mortals a sweet taste of heaven. Today’s Omar Khayyam might extol “a dose of Viagra, a happy meal, and thou in the chat room.” In addition, a new field has leapt into the aphrodisiac fray. Marketing sexualizes virtually anything in order to inspire the masses to open their wallets, rather than their flies. Advertising taps into our most powerful desires, attempting to manipulate our yearnings to be sexually attractive, lovable, happy, powerful, and long-lived—the underlying desires motivating the search for aphrodisiacs in millennia long past. Products promise to turn us into attractive, irresistible love gods and goddesses. As Jill Kilbourn observes in Dangerous Persuasions, “Advertising encourages us not only to objectify each other but also to feel that our most significant relationships are with the products that we buy. It turns lovers into things and things into lovers and encourages us to feel passion for our products rather than our partners.”35

We are even encouraged to substitute food for sex. Richard Klein makes this provocative statement in Eat Fat, “Food is the foremost pleasure left to those who despair of having sex. In the age of AIDS, as sex becomes more fraught with dangers, real and imaginary, food increasingly permits the displacement of libidinal catharsis—the flow of sexual energy—into substitute gratification. And food, in this country, is every day becoming more explicitly sexy.”36 Indeed, even just reading about food is sexualized in a genre known as “food porn.” Witness this panting prose by Adrienne Marcus in The Chocolate Bible: “Each of us has known such moments of orgiastic anticipation, our senses focused at their finest, when control is irrevocably abandoned. Then the tongue possesses, is possessed by, what it most desires: the warmth, liquid melting of thick, dark chocolate.37

There are also some exciting new avenues through which humankind’s understanding of the role food plays in enhancing sex is being explored. Physiologists now define the divine nectars that affect sexual desire, longevity, fertility, and ecstasy as hormones, endorphins, neurotransmitters, and other biochemicals. Scientists believe that eating delicious food triggers the brain to release a flood of endorphins, causing folks to feel more relaxed, happy, and, at times, more sexy. The endorphin system can also be stimulated by opiates in foods, and there is evidence that high-fat and sweet foods can trigger the release of endorphins.38 Tryptophan, the precursor to the mood enhancer serotonin, is found in sunflower seeds, milk, turkey, and pumpkin (there’s that frisky pumpkin pie again). Phenylethylamine, a neurotransmitter that works similarly to cocaine and amphetamines to produce exhilaration and heightened sensitivity, is also found in chocolate and broccoli, among other foods. However, it is not yet known whether a reasonable portion of any food contains enough of these chemicals and whether they can be metabolized in a way that reliably trips the sex switches in the brain.

The way foods send sensory signals to the brain through appearance, taste, and smell is also being examined by psychologists and physiologists. It may be that a whiff of a food odor containing a sex pheromone, or the sight of a dish that reminds an individual of a memorable erotic tryst, may stimulate that giant sex organ, the brain, more powerfully than eating a platterful of the delicacy. The inspiring study of these subtle yet powerful biochemicals and how they can be aroused by food is in its infancy.39 However, at heart, such inquiries reinforce the ancient premise that foods affect sexuality.

It is clear that mortals continue to revere gods and goddesses of one kind or another as they dangle the ultimate
carrot (yet another phallic aphrodisiac vegetable) of heavenly bliss. As long as humanity harbors desires for joy, vitality, and immortality and continues to attempt to fulfill those longings through sex, it will also continue to look for anything that promises to make those encounters more vivid, more fruitful, and more lasting.

NOTES

5. The nusala (nus = "essence," ila = "play"), the divine play between Krishna and the goopi (milkmaids) under the full moon, is a common folk tale and the subject of much Indian erotic poetry and literature, as well as philosophical works. Its origin is Shrimad Bhagavatam 1.31, Srimad Bhagvatra Mahapurana, Part II (Gorakhpur, India: Gita Press, 1982), 1900–1915.
6. In addition to the prohibition against offering garlic in Hindu worship, members of the Brahmin caste do not eat garlic, and celibates are supposed to avoid it completely. In addition to the prohibition against offering garlic in Hindu worship, members of the Brahmin caste do not eat garlic, and celibates are supposed to avoid it completely.
8. In Venice why so many wantons abound?
   - The reason sure is easy to be found,
   - Because, as learned sages all agree,
   - Fair Venus' birthplace was the salt, salt sea.
   
   Quoted in Robert Hendrickson, Lewd Food (Radnor, PA: Chilton Book, 1974), 16.
16. What has come to be known as “the pumpkin pie study” is infamous. Performers and sexologists alike expressed skepticism, not because of the way the study was conducted, but because the results were so unexpected. Even Dr. Hirsch admits puzzlement as to what it says about men’s sexuality. See Cathy Newman, Perfume: The Art and Science of Scent (n.p.: Todtri Productions, 2003), 57.