To the Editor

I have a very belated response to a Borborygmus item from the Summer 2004 issue: The “Reality Sushi” in San Francisco could have its roots at Princeton University—see the enclosed photo of a friend and me in 1994, about to become the “human salad bar” for a seafood feast. The concept was developed by our eating club chef, Barton Rouse, who loved nothing more than food and flesh and spectacle. On other occasions, he submerged a woman breast-high in chocolate pudding and dressed a well-built man in tastefully placed cold cuts. I also paid tribute to Barton recently when I catered a friend’s wedding and dressed my friend (the same cohort from the mermaid pic) as Cleopatra to adorn the Middle Eastern spread.

—Zora O’Neill, Astoria, NY

Editor’s note: See “Eating Ivy,” Lisa Harper’s essay on Barton Rouse, on page 19 of this issue.

MSG

I started your recent article on monosodium glutamate (“A Short History of MSG,” Fall 2005) with interest, as I religiously eschewed the use of MSG throughout twenty-five years of restaurant ownership and seven years of college culinary arts instruction. I was puzzled to see the widespread low-key acceptance of MSG throughout Asia when I studied there but put it down to Western cultural imperialism and thought little of it. Your article would have reinforced my preconceptions about the dangers of MSG and general distrust of large-scale food industry if I had not first read the article unaccountably cited in the article’s bibliography, “Why Doesn’t Everyone in China Have a Headache?” I say “unaccountably,” because your author makes no mention of that article’s revelations of the natural ubiquity and high levels of MSG in such products of corporate malfeasance as Parmesan cheese, tomato paste, soy sauce (including “natural”), fish sauce, and even mother’s milk. Your article’s narrative of the perversion of science in service of commerce would have suffered if the discovery of MSG were revealed as more akin to the isolation of vitamin C from orange juice or the isolation of sucrose, table sugar, from cane juice than to a nefarious food-adulteration scandal.

Interesting investigations into the ramifications of tricking your body into thinking more nutrition is present in a meal than actually exists were not the province of your handsomely illustrated article. But in all fairness, the extravagant claims of the Slow Food movement, et al, for the superior nutrition of their elitist regimens deserve at least as much skepticism as those of the better-living-through-chemistry bunch.

—Jozeph Schultz, Santa Cruz, CA
Glutamic acid is an amino acid found in breast milk and all sorts of other places. Consuming substances that contain glutamic acid is not the same as consuming the compound monosodium glutamate. Since I am a historian and not a biochemist or a doctor, in writing msg’s history I tried to remain scrupulously agnostic on the question of whether or not it is bad for you. I cited Jeffrey Steingarten’s witty article “Why Doesn’t Everyone in China Have a Headache?” approvingly because I agree with his skeptical posture overall. But he is not a biochemist or doctor, either, so I would not take his as the final word on the chemistry or health questions. As I suggested in the article, I view msg as simply another ambiguous substance in the food system, one with a particularly interesting history and bad press. It seems to be difficult for people to read anything about msg without expecting the definitive answer to the health question. To me, the history of msg is an exemplary part of the history of this very concern and the experience of food underlying it. msg was once the first products to move us into the modern world where the taste responses of foods are calibrated and their physiological effects determined in laboratory tests, a world where consumers live in fear and hope of what science will reveal about what they eat.

If you believe msg has been proved harmless in the laboratory, then enjoy it without guilt. I myself don’t avoid it, although I have learned a distaste for the flavor when it comes in recognizable quantities. The only recommendation from this doctor would be to eat whatever your taste buds and body seem to thank you for.
encouraged to include fresh, local, minimally-processed and seasonal foods.

3. Promoting sustainable agricultural practices and preserving cultural and biological diversity are essential for the health of the planet and its inhabitants. To this end, governments should support sustainable, small-scale agriculture on the fringes of large population centres, and protect other threatened farmland.

4. Food producers should be appropriately rewarded for adopting and maintaining practices conducive to long-term sustainability.

5. It is essential that children learn at an early age about food production, flavour, food preparation and food culture; and about the impact of their food choices upon their well-being and that of the environment. All schools have a responsibility in this.

6. Governments need to adopt the precautionary principle in respect to new technologies associated with food.

Although addressed to Australian state governments, this declaration is obviously equally appropriate to the rest of the western world.

There followed three days of a writers’ festival, with lively discussions ranging from the role of farmers’ markets and ethics in the communication of food issues to fusion or confusion when it comes to pushing food boundaries and how to get teenagers into the kitchen.

In case you are thinking that all of these discussions took place without serious attention to eating and drinking, let me reassure you that in addition to all the debates there were chefs’ master classes; culinary seminars on topics as diverse as bread making in a wood-fired oven, olive oils, artisanal cheeses, and using spices; many wine and beer tastings; and a daily tour of the fiery food plants in the Botanic Gardens.

One of the most interesting was the daylong workshop given by chefs Cheong Liew and Tim Pak Poy. Cheong Liew, chef at the Grange Restaurant at the Adelaide Hilton, is widely acknowledged as the father of modern Australian food (and dinner at the Grange is not to be missed). Tim Pak Poy, until recently, was chef-owner of Claude’s, the acclaimed French restaurant in Sydney. They worked with concepts of balance and harmony in the flavors and textures of foods, comparing and contrasting their interpretation in the cuisines of China and France. In the past harmony was achieved by balancing the attributes of individual foods—wet/dry, hot/cold in the West, heating and cooling in the East—whereas today the emphasis is on balance and harmony of flavors and textures.

While all of these public activities were in full swing, teams of chefs and apprentices from Australia and New Zealand were vying to produce the best three-course menu with matching wines in the prestigious regional culinary competition.

No visit to Adelaide is complete without at least one trip to the famous Central Market. The largest covered market in the southern hemisphere, it boasts a wealth of local fresh foods and produce as well as some first-class, unpretentious noodle bars and cafés. During Tasting Australia, the market presented Tasting the Market, with cooking demonstrations by Australian and overseas chefs. On the two Saturdays of the festival, trips were organized to the farmers’ markets in the Barossa Valley and McLaren Vale. The quality and variety of the produce on offer was impressive.

On the final Saturday, at the 2005 World Food Media Awards party,
kudos and gold ladles were conferred on the winners, and then on Sunday was the marvelous Feast for the Senses, with dozens of booths offering food and drink in the agreeable surroundings of Elder Park on the banks of the River Torrens.

The sheer number and variety of events was truly outstanding. The next Tasting Australia will be held in 2007. For more information see www.tastingaustralia.com.au.

The Cult of Gasterea

Beatrice Fink

The rostrums were star-studded at the first forum on Nouvelles tendances culinaires held in Tours, France, in early December 2005. Organized by the Institut Européen de l’Histoire et la Culture de l’Alimentation (IEHCA), the gathering offered two days of total immersion in the manifold facets of the French culinary world. Involved in this undertaking were an awesome number of celebrated chefs from all over France, inter alia some living legends (Pierre Troisgros, Michel Guérard), some avant-garde experimenters (Pascal Barbot, Gilles Choukroun), standard-bearers of rehabilitated tradition (Michel Bras, Olivier Roellinger), plus restaurant owners, hotel-school directors, cooking-school instructors, food/culture historians, vintners, and wine connoisseurs (Henri Marionnet, Jean-Robert Pitte). Last but not least, the dreaded food critics (Le Monde’s Jean-Claude Ribaut and former GaultMillau editor Luc Dubanchet) had their say, and France being France, Inspector General of National Education Christian Petitcolas was smiled at by some and studiously ignored by others. Plenary “roundtables” (actually, panels) in a huge filled-to-capacity auditorium concentrated on varying facets of innovation (geography, wine, industry, science, tradition as generator…), while twenty workshops (ten simultaneous ones per afternoon) targeted special topics such as table décor, diets, vocational training, and gastronomic tourism (meals served during the forum highlighted regional foods of Touraine, including fouace rabelaisienne of Gargantua fame and silure, a quasi-unknown Loire river fish prepared in three different ways). The final celebrity-studded roundtable, which included author Catherine Clément and chefs Michel Guérard,
Guy Savoy, Pascal Barbot, and Marc Veyrat (the latter bedecked with his signature black hat and dark sunglasses), was aptly titled Just Exactly What Is Innovation? Good question! Overall it remained unanswered, but everyone on the panel produced an answer, as did some vociferous members of the audience. Again, France being France, there were debates and tugs o’ war regarding tradition versus innovation, the meaningfulness and usefulness of schooling and degree versus learning in medias res, the absence of upper mobility in a profession where the biggies seem to some to be walled into their personal sinecure, and the role of the Ministry of Education. These confrontations produced some of the forum’s most exciting moments.

Although innovation was the centerpiece, the presentations could have been more substantial. Aside from Alberto Capatti and his by now well-known Slow Food movement and associated journal, the only truly novel trend discussed and demonstrated was Hervé This’s trendy chemical approach to cookery labeled gastronomie moléculaire. In didactic manner, This, a research scientist who does a lot of teaching, explained what was occurring while chef Emile Jung produced a whipped cream version of foie gras on stage (I was able to sample some; it tasted, well, odd). There was no discussion of fusion food, of Bruno Goussault and sous-vide cooking, or of the new (Parisian) practice of fooding, which may roughly be described as fancying up pedestrian foods.

Is this because the French somehow feel that innovation is both cause and effect of globalization? The prime movers of French cuisine and wine are acutely aware of competition from abroad and the dangers it poses to their consecrated Gallic fiefdom. Their reactions are diverse. Some are philosophical. Some move on to greener pastures abroad. Speaking of innovation, the praise of Spanish chef Ferran Adrià a few months ago in the New York Times ruffled one participating French chef’s feathers so badly that he exclaimed that this was the Times’s way of getting back at France because Jacques Chirac had refused to let his country join the US-led coalition in Iraq. Wow! Talk of mortars fired from the galley! This mortar, however, went astray. All in all, the forum was a great event and testifies to the undying cult of Gasterea in France.

From Farfel to Falafel: Food, Wine, and Jewish Culture

The University of California–Davis’s Program in Jewish Studies is presenting a three-day conference on food and wine in Jewish culture to take place at UC Davis from May 14 to 16, 2006. The conference is cosponsored by the Robert Mondavi Institute for Food and Wine, one of the world’s leading centers for the scientific study of food and wine, and by the Judah L. Magnes Museum, the oldest collecting Jewish museum of Northern California.

This cross-disciplinary conference will investigate the way food and wine function in Jewish culture, from biblical antiquity to the present day. Since everyone must eat and drink, food plays a central role in popular and folk culture, but it is equally important to high or literary culture. Panelists will explore the ways in which food and wine function as bridges between high and popular cultures within the Jewish tradition. Food and wine also represent bonds between neighboring cultures. To what extent have these cultural threads functioned as bridges between Jewish and other cultures in different historical periods?

In addition to scholarly sessions, a number of hands-on activities will be available, including food sampling and wine tasting, as well as film screenings and musical offerings. Keynote speakers Mollie Katzen and Joyce Goldstein represent members of the Northern California Jewish culinary community in a subject that has both academic and broader cultural interest. The conference is open and free to the general public.

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