De gustibus non disputandum

Food and Philosophy: Eat, Think and Be Merry
Edited by Fritz Allhof and Dave Monroe
v + 310 pp. $19.95 (paper)

Wine and Philosophy: A Symposium on Thinking and Drinking
Edited by Fritz Allhof
v + 308 pp. $19.95 (paper)

Beer and Philosophy: The Unexamined Beer Isn’t Worth Drinking
Edited by Steven D. Hales
v + 233 pp. $19.95 (paper)

Who knew? Certainly not armchair philosophers in their ivory towers. Well, maybe, by stirring their undergraduate memories. Then, reflecting on beer-pitcher-fueled discussions of life’s deepest problems, they might, just might, recall the philosophically rich phenomenon known as “beer goggles.” For readers unfamiliar with the phenomenon it can be explained in simple terms: There exists a direct relationship between the quantity of beer imbibed and the growing attractiveness of potential mates. This phenomenon has even generated a moral dictum, “Drink ‘til he’s cute.” Or so, at least, reports Steven Bayne in his contribution to one of the books under review, Beer and Philosophy.

It turns out that not only have reputable psychologists at well-respected institutions done experimental studies on this effect, but it also serves as a kind of focal point for various philosophical questions: How trustworthy is perception? What is reality, and does it differ from appearance? What is “cuteness” anywhere? Isn’t beauty always in the eye of the beholder? What duties, if any, do I owe myself and others? Aren’t all value judgments just a matter of opinion? Shouldn’t we, as Theodore Schick argues in another of the volume’s essays, “knock back a few” if we wish to shake off the dull, pedestrian, dry mode of perception and seek “to fully understand what it is to be human” (Beer, p.147)?

According to the volumes under review, philosophical questions, far from being rooted in any arcane and inaccessible realm, can be occasioned by the most mundane, gullet-centered activities. These collections belong to a trend that really got going at the end of the last century: reconnecting philosophy and ordinary life. Professional, academic philosophers had done a bang-up job of disconnection, making philosophy the province of ultra-specialists who could speak only to each other. Such isolation, however, seemed downright un-Socratic. Following the Socratic model of bringing philosophy to the town square, the 1990s saw a rise in texts more accessible to a wider public. The great success of Jostein Gaarder’s Sophie’s World (English translation, 1994), a didactic novel introducing the history of philosophy, was an early sign of a thirst for ideas among the general population. Paul Strathern, an Irish professor, single-handedly produced a series of “90 minute” introductions (e.g., Nietzsche in 90 Minutes, Descartes in 90 Minutes, Plato, Aristotle etc.). Continuum press developed a series entitled “Guides for the Perplexed” (e.g., Deleuze: A Guide for the Perplexed, Hegel: A Guide for the Perplexed, etc.). The series aimed to provide books that are “clear, concise and accessible introductions to thinkers, writers and subjects that students and readers can find especially challenging.”

The most renowned effort was the Open Court “Popular Culture and Philosophy” collection, anchored by successes like Seinfeld and Philosophy and The Simpsons and Philosophy. The series editor, William Irwin, has now moved to Blackwell, where he is assembling a series analogous to the Open Court one, the “Blackwell Philosophy and Popular Culture Series.” Its initial volumes deal mostly with popular television shows and philosophy (e.g., South Park and Philosophy, The Office and Philosophy, The Daily Show and Philosophy). Separately, Blackwell has also produced the three texts...
under review: Food and Philosophy, Beer and Philosophy, and Wine and Philosophy. While they may not officially fit into the Popular Culture and Philosophy series, the works set out to address the intersection between philosophy and areas of everyday general concern: food, wine, and beer.

These areas are of obvious interest to readers of Gastronomica. But what, exactly, do such texts seek to accomplish? Typically, one would expect a cluster like the following: (1) writing that is engaging; (2) content that brings readers to appreciate the importance of philosophy; (3) a pattern for how philosophy can play a role in serious reflection about what is mundane; (4) perhaps an explanation of a philosophical doctrine or thinker, using examples or studies drawn from the ordinary experiences associated with food and drink; and (5) an approach encouraging readers to examine philosophers directly. For William Irwin, the move to blend popular culture and philosophy is akin to a bicycle with training wheels. Ultimately, the aim is to move beyond the training wheels into an independent appreciation of philosophy itself.

Yet the editors of the Food and Philosophy volume identify a trajectory that moves in another direction. They identify a double aim for their collection: (1) showing food lovers that “critical reflection upon what and how we eat can contribute to a robust enjoyment of gastronomic pleasures” and (2) drawing “philosophical attention to food itself” (Food, p.2). What actually occurs in the three volumes is something between the “training wheel” goal and that of turning to “food itself.”

Of all the possible questions occasioned by reflection on wine, beer, and food, the topic that gets most prominence in these volumes has to do with taste. Just about every writer who takes on this issue refutes de gustibus non disputandum. Why not? They are disputatious philosopher-types, after all. Being philosopher-types, though, they also provide arguments. John Bender, both a philosopher and a judge in wine competitions, points out that “critical reflection upon what and how we eat does not rule. In fact, people ought to be open “to change, persuasion can alter taste. This means that raw subjectivity need not mean a revival of old-style aristocratic elitism. Most worrisome is “the collapse of a regime of truth for which the daily newspaper served as a central instrument, and the ascendancy of a rival discourse, in which advertising, brand, and image are central” (Food, p.96).

Iggers honestly admits an intersection that often goes unacknowledged in democratic societies. Judgment, he points out, requires “a certain kind of preparation whose acquisition is a matter of class” (Food, p.95). This situation need not mean a revival of old-style aristocratic elitism. The daily newspaper, for all its failings, could help social mobility and serve as an instrument of informed taste. Unfortunately, our world, dominated by advertisers, makes that role less and less effective. Instead, “branding” via aggressive publicity has become the key shaper of taste. Most worrisome is “the collapse of a regime of truth for which the daily newspaper served as a central instrument, and the ascendancy of a rival discourse, in which advertising, brand, and image are central” (Food, p.96).

Iggers’s essay should be read in conjunction with Michael Shaffer’s, which precedes it. Shaffer’s piece comes closest to a refined relativism, admitting, in the end, that the “alleged gastronomic experts do not generally possess any special sensory abilities absent in most any Tom, Dick, or Harry” (Food, p.85). Another cautionary essay is that of Jamie Goode, who carefully describes the actual experience of perceiving. Goode, while no relativist, nonetheless recognizes the importance of perceptual pluralism, arguing against any “one size fits all model” that would encourage looking for the “uber-critic” (Wine, p.153). In general, relativism is overwhelmingly rejected. Some titles give the game away: “Good Beer, or How to Properly Dispute Taste,” by Peter Machamer; and, most blatantly, George Gale’s “Who Cares If You Like It, This Is a Good Wine Regardless.”

Besides taste, other value questions dominate. Choices about what to eat occupy several writers. Jen Wrye provides a taxonomy of vegetarians and near-vegetarians, along with a survey of why people choose to avoid meat. Matthew Brown’s “Picky Eating Is a Moral Failing” identifies four “gustatory obligations: openness, self-knowledge, accommodation, and grace” (Food, p.205). Unlike the arguments surveyed by Wrye, Brown, associating vegetarianism with picky eating, claims that moral reasons argue against it.
Paul Thompson provides a funny “pox on all your houses” essay discussing genetically modified organisms. His is a decisively libertarian position that highlights the continuity between traditional plant breeding techniques and the newer modes of genetic modification, as well as the main drawback of non-GMO plants—their need for heavy pesticide use. Safety, following the best kinds of standards we can come up with, is the issue, he argues, not a sweeping fear of gene-transfer technology. The reasons advanced for not eating GMOs are examples of “self-deception.” Those same reasons could apply “to virtually everything we eat!” (Food, p.215). Still, good libertarian that he tries to be, Thompson’s ultimate position is that there is no need to “police each other’s food choices” (Food, p.217).

Probably the most informative general articles about the intersection of food and philosophy are by Michael Symons and Roger King. Symons argues in favor of Epicurus against Plato as hero-philosopher. Taking the phenomenology of eating seriously allows Symons to identify a set of positions he calls the “foodie or epicurean default.” Some ingredients in the default include: a sense of being at home in the world, the importance of moderation and limits, continuity between etiquette and ethics, the importance of companionship, interdependence rather than a dog-eat-dog approach to life, and an appreciation for learning via experience rather than based on authority or ideology (Food, pp.21–22). King’s “Eating Well: Thinking Ethically About Food” shows convincingly how eating is not simply a “personal” act. Our eating choices, he points out, are “nodal points in a vast web of interrelations, interactions, and flows of energy” (Food, p.180).

Another area of importance has to do with the general field of aesthetics. The writers, once again, tend toward convergence: food can be treated as an art. Indeed, thinking about food can necessitate some changes in the current paradigm. What is needed, according to Kevin Sweeney, is a return to the eighteenth-century approach in which the arts were thought to resemble “metaphorically, alimentary experience” (Food, p.119). Dave Monroe urges us to think in terms of performance arts as paradigmatic, rather than painting or sculpture. Then we can begin to overcome the greatest obstacle to treating food as art, what Monroe calls the “Consumption Exclusion Thesis” (i.e., if it can be consumed it can’t be art). This point is reinforced in the essay by the president of Dogfish Head Craft Brewing, Sam Calagione, who asserts that “big breweries make a product, small breweries make consumable art” (Beer, p.86).

In addition to straightforward philosophical discussions, the volumes include historical discussions, legal questions, some personal reflections, a discussion of “extreme brewing,” and an analysis of terroir. Overall, Beer and Philosophy seems most satisfying to this reviewer. It includes more essays that encourage the next step of engaging philosophers themselves, has the fewest contributions with only a tangential link to philosophy, avoids including essays mostly indistinguishable from those written for a professional audience, and discusses a wide range of issues. In this last regard, it is the only volume with an entry dealing with the philosophy of religion. This contribution is also the only one that is a dialogue (the prototypical “Socratic” mode of philosophizing), Neil Manson’s “The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Beer.” Manson actually provides a new argument for the existence of God based on the propensity to enjoy beer. What Manson does not mention is whether his argument works best before or after the tipping point that activates one’s beer goggles.