To the Editor:

Meat and Market

It was with great excitement that I awaited my first issue of *Gastronomica*, what I expected to be an epicurean resource. After receiving it recently, I wish to forward some rather despondent input. On so many levels it is hard to capture, I have issues with Charlie Grosso’s “Market and Meat” photographic sample of her *Wok the Dog* project (Summer 2008).

This is, at a minimum, sensationalist journalism but, more realistically, work that is the result of an individual’s fascination with the macabre. This opinion is exemplified by Ms. Grosso’s revolting and callous picture titles. Additionally, I see no connection between the statement “…but we have lost our connection not only to the vendors who sell us our food, but to life itself, to the animal our dinner once was” and the photographs shown, which depict the goriest elements of slaughter with no correlation to the actual sentient being. It would have been so much more powerful, appropriate, and value added if, after that statement, she had shown or detailed information on the Buy Local or Grass Fed movements, which actually do connect you with your food, where it comes from, and the vendors who provide it to the market.

Ultimately, the magazine carries much responsibility for giving this type of eccentricity exposure, so I have canceled my subscription.

—CJ Penley, Pleasanton, CA

Charlie Grosso responds:

The point of my project is to raise cultural awareness and cause viewers to rethink ideas about Western cultural superiority. My work questions whether we have modernized and sterilized our food industry to the point where we have lost something of value that less-developed nations still retain. How can we impose our own standards of right and wrong on those who must eat, on those who do not see a dog as a companion but as food, given their cultural norms?

Most of my images do, in fact, depict local and grass-fed livestock, because the majority of the cultures I photograph know little of the industrialized killing machine we have created here in the States. Experience has taught me that markets like those depicted in my photos waste far less than we do and make use of every part of the slaughtered animal. Their practices represent a far more profound display of respect for the sentient being that gave up its life than does the standard Western approach of only eating select parts and discarding the rest.

I urge *Gastronomica* readers to put aside outrage and take another look at my work, and at the fuller body of work that is offered on my Web site (www.charliestudio.com). We must look beyond our immediate surroundings and think about the global society.

Spread

On 9/11 I resigned from my job. Now, I stare out the window. Ruminate and integrate. Flash back to previous jobs, like the maximum-security prison. Ironically (mercifully), the slower I get, the faster come the instances of synchronicity: I sit and browse through the reading pile. I glance at an article in *Texas Monthly* on an inmate on death row reprieved three or four times. He’s talking about life on the inside. About making *spread*. Yesterday I watched *Waitress* with its beautiful renditions of themed pies (“Bad Baby Pie”). And then today, with summer’s passing (cold this morning), I grasped the Summer issue of *Gastronomica* and just devoured Sandra Cates’s article on *spread* in the county jail (“Pie Guy Pie”!!). Wow! Now I remember this fabulous dream I just had—after no big dreams for so many months—of a “dead” town square where old white ladies began serving their specialty treats to the immigrant people at the edge. And it became a regular community feast—an honor to have one’s food accepted (egg custards!) and everyone talked to each other. Sort of potlatch. Rejuvenating the heart of the town. Yeah—*the spread*! (“Nice little spread you have here…”)

Rumblings from the World of Food
So thank you, *Gastronomica*, and thank Sandra. The inmates aren’t the only “still hungry” folks in prison. On my twelve-hour shifts I was always hungry. One day I cut through the kitchen of one of the pods after hand-delivering meds to lock-down. An inmate I knew was cooking hamburgers. We were alone. “God that smells good!” I said. “Green chile cheeseburgers,” he said. “Want one?” I’m crystallized into a moment of medicine where the hierarchy flips so that the prisoner gifts the keeper. And it was perfect. Toasted sesame seed bun, thick patty of beef, cheddar cheese and roasted green chile, just hot enough. Right off the griddle with no favor asked in return. I ate the whole thing one-handed walking across the yard.

So, thanks for the magazine!

—Requa Tolbert, Santa Fe, NM

*Good Bread*

Nobody’s perfect, not even Steven L. Kaplan. But then, neither are his critics. Is William Rubel’s thrust (*Gastronomica*, Summer 2008) aimed at Peter Reinhart’s review or at Kaplan’s book *Good Bread Is Back*?

Let’s start with Reinhart, considered guilty, it appears, of scholarly ignorance, or rather of not having gone through Rubel’s reading list. I quite agree that in our era of bottom-line mentality it is indeed unfortunate that rare, centuries-old books are neither translated nor published in cheap French editions, and it is even more unfortunate that without having digested these works one is not able fully to assess what Kaplan is trying to get across. Why not have a look at Rubel’s “obvious sources,” those that render the “multifaceted world of French bread during the Age of Enlightenment” accessible merely to the happy few? First on the list is Charles Estienne. Quite apart from wondering whether someone who died in 1564 may be squeezed into eighteenth-century France, is it scholarly to hold him accountable for a statement in an edition published thirty-four years after his death? Anyone familiar with multi-edition early modern cookbooks—and this was certainly the case for *Maison rustique*—knows that they most often underwent significant changes, and that in the case at hand it was Jean Liebault who took over after the very first edition (1564). As to the Avis Rubel quotes from, there happen to be two books by Antoine Augustin Parmentier whose titles begin with
“Good bread” can be understood (oat, barley, buckwheat, etc.) displayed (ergotized rye was a very real problem), to name but a few of the relevant listings. Where preferences or ratings are concerned, it’s hard to find an entry where the wheat-based pain de froment doesn’t come out on top. The ongoing social, economic, and political upheavals of wheat during the century meant that in periods of scarcity people resorted to cheaper grains, to ersatz. A full-coverage, contemporary history of French bread should admittedly account not only for the whole array of breads (oat, barley, buckwheat, etc.) displayed under the pain entry, but I doubt that such was Kaplan’s intention, given the loaded term his title begins with. “Good bread” can be understood in differing ways, but it necessarily implies a value judgment. Lest we forget, food is a matter of taste. And nutrition is a matter of health. Brown breads, as Rubel reminds us, “helped to regulate the bowels,” and la purge was considered a panacea for all sorts of ailments well into the eighteenth century. During the Revolutionary era, the scarcity of wheat was such that a legislated pain d’égalité, symbolizing the eradication of all class distinctions, was indeed of the méteil variety, since it consisted of three-quarters wheat flour and one-quarter rye.

Of course rye flour was around in France back then, just as it is now. However, my own readings of French eighteenth-century texts and my experience of France and things French, both of which are quite extensive, lead me to believe that Kaplan’s notion of “good bread” is quite in sync with that of the French. Does failing to account for méteil really mean that Kaplan has “fundamental problems with his version of eighteenth-century French bread history,” and that his notion of good bread makes for “poor history and a disservice to artisan bakers”? Just because there is a hair in the soup, as the French would say, doesn’t mean that the soup as such isn’t good.

—Beatrice Fink, Washington, D.C. and Paris

Cities of Spice

I am writing to correct a series of errors that appear in Clifford Wright’s review of my book The Taste of Conquest: The Rise and Fall of the Three Great Cities of Spice (Gastronomica, Summer 2008). Space does not allow me to address all of his mischaracterizations, but allow me to note at least a few.

He writes: “Krondl [criticizes] ‘economic historians’ for having written that spices were used as a preservative when we all know spices were never so used.” Mr. Wright alleges this error is rare. Alas, it is much too common. Michael Naylor Pearson, in the introduction to Spices in the Indian Ocean World (a seminal collection of essays on the subject), notes that “spices…were widely used to disguise the semi-putrid smell and keep meat palatable throughout the winter” (p.xvi). Fernand Braudel writes: “the badly preserved and not always tender meat cried out for the seasoning of strong peppers and spicy sauces, which disguised its poor quality” (Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century, Vol. 1, p.221). In this same paragraph, Braudel then contrasts the “modest” use of spices in Ancient Rome to the medieval European “spice orgy.” This follows a discussion of recipes. Mr. Wright erroneously alleges that “Braudel was talking about the trade in spices, not their culinary uses.”

Mr. Wright critiques my bibliography, which is supposedly missing important sources. In fact, most of the historians Mr. Wright claims I did not consult appear in several of the listed anthologies.

He asserts that I imply “that the Crusaders were responsible for spice use in Christian Europe (pp.17, 57).” What I actually wrote is that the Crusades were a contributing factor in increasing European aristocrats’ taste for spice: “The spice trade had never entirely dried up in the Dark Ages…Most historians do think, though, that there was a steady increase that came with the Crusades.” I also note other factors that increased the taste for spice, including the flourishing economy, newly available Arabic medical texts, and cross-cultural encounters in Iberia.

Mr. Wright states that “spices did not pass through Mecca on their way to Europe,” citing Patricia Crone. The point I make is that Mecca was an important transit point in the Middle Ages. Crone’s thesis concerns Mecca more than five hundred years earlier!

Mr. Wright asserts that I “assume that spices were consumed in cooking, without exploring the possibility that the majority of spices were not used for culinary purposes.” In fact, I do explore the medical uses of spices at length (see Part 3, “Amsterdam”). Still, it’s worth pointing out that in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries pepper and ginger made up 75 to 90 percent of all imported spices (see Spices in the Indian Ocean World, p.173). Since these two were overwhelmingly used in cooking, it is
rational to conclude that most of the spice imported into Europe at this time was indeed destined for the table.

Mr. Wright faults my analysis, misquoting me as stating that “pepper imports did not keep pace with population increase in the early fifteenth century (p.256).” I actually wrote: “demand for pepper had been increasing by modest increments in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Then, when the price war between the Dutch, English, and Portuguese sent the price tumbling, demand doubled within a few decades. But that was it…the hunger for pepper crashed into a rock-solid ceiling.”

It is unfortunate that Mr. Wright’s obvious distaste for the book’s nonacademic style led him to misquote and mischaracterize its actual contents.

—Michael Kiondl, New York, NY

Hitler the Vegetarian?

Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft

One of our most cherished but least explored beliefs is that there is a deep connection between culture and politics. We assume—and not always incorrectly—that we can draw conclusions about people’s political beliefs based on how they dress, the music they listen to, and what they eat or refuse to eat. In the current trend to promote organic and local foodstuffs, shopping at farmers’ markets is associated with laudably progressive stances on social issues, while conventional produce and big supermarkets are associated with an environment-be-damned conservatism. Although such prominent food-politics authors as Marion Nestle and Michael Pollan have demonstrated that there is a political dimension to consumer behavior, sometimes the belief that culture is always political leads us to make mistakes.

In a bizarre but fascinating case, an old dispute regarding Adolf Hitler’s possible vegetarianism was recently reopened. Few of the twentieth-century’s villains have had as much attention lavished on their diets as Hitler. Nazi Party propagandists celebrated him as a vegetarian and animal lover, and he spoke out on the virtues of vegetarian and even raw diets at dinners he shared with his senior staff. Although some historians accept this vegetarian image, others have attacked it in hopes of demonstrating that Hitler was, in fact, a meat-eater (see, for instance, Rynn Berry’s 2004 Adolf Hitler: Neither Vegetarian Nor Animal Lover). A more dramatic incident involved the New York Times and an organization calling itself the Jewish Vegetarians of North America (JvNA). In a 2005 review of the German film Downfall, which chronicled Hitler’s last days and presented him as a vegetarian, the Times failed to contest the film’s assessment of Hitler’s diet. The first line of the review described one of Hitler’s last meals, eaten in his bunker hideout in Berlin shortly before his suicide: a plate of cheese ravioli, for “the Führer did not eat meat.”

Presumably concerned by the Times’s perpetuation of Hitler’s vegetarian image, activists and scholars affiliated with the JvNA wrote to the newspaper presenting evidence that, despite propaganda, Hitler in fact enjoyed sausages, chicken, and other fleshy delicacies. The Times then published the following correction: “A film review on Feb. 18 about Downfall, which looks at Hitler’s final days, referred incorrectly to his diet. Although the movie portrays him as a vegetarian, he did eat at least some meat” (15 March 2005). Encouraged by this small victory, the JvNA then issued its own press release, which expressed the hope that “the pernicious myth of Hitler’s vegetarianism” might be “smashed forever,” and presented the Times’s correction as a step toward this goal. They thanked the staff of the Times, which they called “the nation’s newspaper of record,” for helping to set the public straight about Hitler’s meat-eating and asked other writers who had perpetuated the myth of Hitler’s vegetarianism to publish their own retractions and apologies.

For some reason, this 2005 press release has recently begun circulating again, prompting me to ask just what motivates the JvNA’s obvious, and continued, discomfort? Why should Hitler’s vegetarianism—real or mythic—have upset them so much in the first place? Without citing any particular cases, the JvNA’s press release claims that critics of meatless diets have used Hitler’s alleged dietary choices to criticize other vegetarians, and that this is what made their campaign necessary. Of course, it is ludicrous that anyone would seriously entertain the idea that Hitler’s ostensible vegetarianism somehow discredits vegetarianism altogether. It seems relatively clear that the decision to eschew meat has nothing to do with the decision to kill Jews or invade Poland. Generations of men have grown mustaches despite the fact that Hitler sported one, and the Nazi penchant for calisthenics has not made anyone avoid yoga classes.

The historical truth or untruth of Hitler’s vegetarianism may, as I suggested in a recent article in Meatpaper, be far less important than the discomfort it generates in us. That the JvNA have asked writers to apologize for having ascribed vegetarianism to Hitler represents a cultural event in its own right. We do tend to associate vegetarianism—like other dietary practices—with particular cultural identities and political orientations.
Food Politics and the Discourse of Fear in Italy
FRANCESCO CAPELLO

On a visit to Italy last summer, I was distressed to learn that Daniele Belotti, a councillor from Lombardy’s Northern League in the region of Milan, had recently proposed to ban kebab shops from all the historic centers in the region’s cities. As reported by the local newspaper E Poli Torino on July 22, the plan was conceived “to prevent shopkeepers from selling products which are deemed incompatible with the historical and urban context.”

What lay behind this decision? The Northern League (Lega Nord, in Italian) is a party of the governing coalition currently led by Silvio Berlusconi’s Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom). Over the last fifteen years the Lega has been a prominent force in the center-right-wing coalition, establishing itself by an average 6 to 8 percent of the vote in each election—a remarkable showing, in view of the fact that the party has hardly any supporters in the central and southern parts of the country.

The political actions of the Lega do not seem of particular interest to voters in the northern strongholds. With rare exceptions, people passively witnessed the shift from the late-1990s radical anti-parliamentary policy against Roma ladrona (“Rome the Robber,” as the slogan went) to the relatively peaceful installment of the Lega MPs in the capital’s political establishment. Hard-core secessionist campaigns were eschewed in favor of a more diplomatic (albeit elusive) project of federalism. More to the point, the longstanding prejudice against southern Italians was replaced by a downright xenophobic agenda, whose main target is now foreign immigrants.

the United States vegetarianism is often linked with healthy living, the defense of nonhuman animal life, and progressive politics. However, while demographic research might tell a fascinating story about the voting patterns of vegetarians, it would be sloppy to imagine links between culture and politics that don’t really exist: there is no necessary connection between vegetarianism and pacifism, nor between vegetarianism and Judaism, just as there is no necessary connection between eating steaks and Republicanism. Hitler’s “vegetarianism” would have no power to make us anxious if we simply thought clearly about dietary choices. Though they can become markers of political affiliation, they don’t start out that way.

NOTES
What really seems to matter to the Lega politicians and those who support them is the political discourse, or narrative. This story, familiar to many, goes more or less like this: we (i.e., the good, healthy, productive members of society) hereby declare war on you (i.e., the bad, immoral, unproductive members) because you constitute a threat not only to our safety and well-being, but to our very identity. But here is the crucial bit: except for the basic plot, all of the elements—the characters, setting, and actions—are interchangeable. Thus, it is irrelevant whether the “bad ones” happen to be southern Italians, Romanians, or Nigerians, as long as they are easily recognizable as the Other. Nor does it matter whether the threat resides in actual crime or simply in different eating habits, ethnicity, or religion. The real goal is the immediate and somewhat magical (but, indeed, illusory!) reassurance that derives from splitting a complex, mixed whole into a more recognizable and therefore less frightening duality of all-good and all-bad, with the latter usually projected outwards, onto the different Other.

The British psychoanalyst W.R. Bion has observed that in groups where this kind of mechanism prevails (he termed them “basic assumption groups”), interactions and actual choices are less likely to be reality-oriented. And, in fact, in the face of the ban on kebab shops, or the proposal to exclude ethnic dishes from public canteens in Rome in order to promote “Italianness” (one of the city council’s first initiatives, led by Gianni Alemanno, the newly appointed far-right mayor), it is pointless to argue that every day, and quite normally, equally non-Italian McDonald’s and Starbucks open new branches in ancient buildings in the city centers; or that Italy continues to owe a lot, in terms of both image and economic benefits, to the exportation of its food culture, which was initially carried out by its emigrants; or that the very identity of Italian cuisine, characterized by a marked regional diversity, originates from a centuries-long process of encounters and creative dialogue among many different traditions, among which the now-stigmatized Middle Eastern culture played a preeminent role. (Incidentally, and ironically, Alemanno’s surname bears witness to the foreign presence of Germans in Italy.)

Fear precludes thinking and creativity; it perpetuates itself through aggressiveness. As in individual lives, patterns of fear and of creativity coexist in societies, too, and periodically they change places, for all kinds of reasons. Although these reasons are, on the whole, overdetermined and, to an extent, unknowable, what is politically crucial to acknowledge is that at times when the discourse of fear seems to appeal the most, we must not abandon reality-oriented initiative and responsibility. Which means, for instance, reminding Mr. Belotti and his like-minded comrades that in healthy societies, food—including kebabs—brings people together instead of driving them apart.

Where’s the (Ethical Kosher) Beef?

Leah Koenig

Last May, federal immigration agents raided Agriprocessors, Inc., America’s largest kosher meatpacking plant. The raid, which shook up the sleepy town of Postville, Iowa, where Agriprocessors is based, resulted in almost four hundred arrests of immigrants working illegally at the plant, and the arrest of the company’s former CEO, Aaron Rubashkin. The plant was eventually shut down. In the days following the raid, some of the Agriprocessor workers began to speak out about the abusive and neglectful working conditions they faced on the job.
This was not the first occurrence of public strife for Agriprocessors. In 2004, clandestinely filmed videos of the plant surfaced, which showed some workers treating animals with excessive cruelty on the kill floor. The company rushed to placate any negative reaction from consumers by hiring animal welfare expert Temple Grandin as a consultant. But Jewish food activists began to advise kosher consumers against purchasing Agriprocessors’ products, suggesting that while their meat was “kosher” in the traditional understanding of the word (meaning slaughtered in accordance with kosher law), it failed to meet other Jewish ethical precepts.

The scale of last May’s raid, and the significant media attention paid to it, vaulted the conversation about the ethics of kosher meat out of the fringe and into the mainstream Jewish community. Internal battle lines began to get drawn between those people who were outraged by Agriprocessors’ actions and determined to boycott their products, and those who criticized the media for slander against the company and encouraged consumers to continue buying as usual. The debate both heightened and sharpened preexisting religious and ethical divides, while provoking questions about what it should mean for food to be “fit” (the literal meaning of kosher) for Jews to eat. In other words, is the Jewish community mandated to follow the letter of kosher law only, or are we also responsible for ensuring a space on the dinner plate for other Jewish ethical standards, such as sensitive treatment of animals and fair labor practices?

As someone who has been vegetarian for almost a decade, my decision not to eat Agriprocessors’ meat was clear. But for those kosher-keeping Jews who were not willing or able to give up meat, entirely avoiding Agriprocessors (which, before the plant shut down, was virtually the only kosher meat available in some communities) was less straightforward. So, the real underlying question that I think the Jewish community needs to grapple with is, “Where do we go from here?”

One hundred years ago, most Jewish families either slaughtered their own chickens for their Shabbat tables or knew the shochet (kosher slaughterer) and butcher who did. Moreover, slaughtering itself was done on a relatively small scale. In contrast, like many Americans, today’s kosher-keeping Jews eat significantly more meat than they did a few generations ago. Meanwhile, they have handed over all responsibilities surrounding the raising and killing of animals to centralized meat-processing plants and therefore put their trust in complete strangers to do the dirty work on their behalf. The raid on Agriprocessors (which at peak production before May 2008 was processing a staggering five hundred cattle and sixty thousand chickens, six days a week) represents a complete shattering of that trust. Moreover, it indicates that at the heart of this individual situation lurks a much larger and more systemic problem.

All of the issues currently facing the kosher food industry—problems of scale, industrialization, and a “profit over principles” mentality—probably sound familiar to any food activist. In a sense, every sustainable food movement (organic, local, Fair Trade, etc.) was built on the same shattered trust that the Jewish community is currently experiencing. But as evidenced in each of these movements, as consumers lose faith in their food, they begin to call for—and eventually build—better models. Although the Jewish community is still at the beginning of this process, the first inklings of what ethical kosher meat consumption might look like are already starting to emerge.

Over the last three years, several sustainable kosher meat co-ops and independent companies have sprouted up around the country, signaling consumers’ desire to keep kosher while still maintaining their ethical standards. Meanwhile, rabbis and other Jewish communal leaders across the denominational spectrum are beginning to speak and write about these issues, and Jewish sustainability organizations (like my employer, Hazon, and others) are fostering the budding ethical kosher movement through education and advocacy. Perhaps most excitingly, the Conservative and Reform movements are working together to create a kosher certification called Hekhsher Tzedek, which would indicate that food (meat and otherwise) is both traditionally kosher and ethically produced. As the Hekhsher Tzedek founder, Rabbi Morris Allen, often says, “Jewish people shouldn’t have to choose between the free-range chicken and the kosher chicken. There shouldn’t be that split.”

It is still unclear what lasting impact the raid on Agriprocessors will have on kosher consumers and the larger Jewish community. In the face of the sprawling kosher industry, the current movement towards ethical, kosher meat production is still remarkably small. But, if there’s one thing the Jewish community understands, it is hope in the face of adversity. And I am hopeful that as a community, we will be able to create a food system that reflects all of our values and once again be able to trust our food.
The 2009 Sophie Coe Prize in Food History

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The award is made by a small panel of judges for an essay or article on some aspect of food history embodying new research or providing new insights. Food history, food, and cookery are large subject areas. All aspects qualify, but the judges look for serious, informative, and original essays. The prize is specifically for essays, articles, or papers as opposed to books, although, exceptionally, an excerpt from a book can be considered if it stands alone as a self-contained essay.

Work published in the twelve months preceding the deadline for submission is eligible, as is work recently written but not yet published. Entries must be submitted in the English language, will normally be in the range of 1,500 to 10,000 words, and the author must be able to assert his or her moral right to be considered its author; an entry from two or more coauthors will be considered on the same basis. The deadline for entries is 23 June 2009. For full details of how to enter for the prize, please write to the secretary of the Sophie Coe Memorial Fund, Laura Mason, at 4 St John Street, York Y03 7Q7, England, or e-mail her at lhmasson@ntlworld.com.

Gastronomica Forum

The next Gastronomica Forum will be held on February 18 from 6:30–8:30 p.m. at the Astor Center in New York City. Artist Nina Katchadourian will discuss the social significance of her work, including Genealogy of the Supermarket, which was featured in the November issue of Gastronomica. Visit www.astorcenternyc.com or www.gastronomica.org for more information.

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