Rumblings from the World of Food

To the Editor

I just read Mark Morton’s piece “White Noise” (Summer 2009) and it made me cry.

Thank you for voicing in such a straightforward yet arresting way how ignorant hatred pervades our society. Food is, unfortunately, a convenient vehicle for people to push their own agendas.

I look forward to reading more of Mark Morton’s words.

—Johanna Lowe, Buchanan, MI

Pop! Cherries in Taiwan
Lola Milholland

What if you had never tasted a dark, sweet cherry? That was the situation U.S. cherry growers encountered in the early 1990s, when they determined to build an export market in Taiwan for Northwest cherries, mainly dark-red Bings and blushing yellow Rainiers. Though cherries have grown in greater China for millennia, the native varieties are as different in look and flavor from Bings as long, slender eggplants are from their massive, globular cousins. Twenty-five years ago few Taiwanese had tasted the plump, maroon cherries; even fewer were willing to spend what amounted to eight dollars a pound to buy them.

But the Washington State Fruit Commission saw this lack of familiarity as an opportunity. Eric Melton, their international promotional director, and Chris Lin, their marketing representative in Taiwan, conceived of a campaign to cast cherries as youthful and sexy. In 1997 Northwest Cherries, one of the Commission’s promotional arms, arranged for a Taiwanese record company to fly the budding pop star Gigi Leung to Yakima, Washington, to film a music video.

Northwest Cherries’ spokesman, Andrew Willis, describes that first “Cherry Girl” deal: “We flew over her whole entourage—her manager, hair and makeup, parents; the director, his cameraman, light, sound, and gear. We’d take them around to places of beauty in Washington. Together, we’d weave together a narrative, meet a few times about concepts. We’d field their requests for, say, a vintage red
convertible." The Commission paid for all production costs but did not pay Leung or the record company any fees. Their only stipulation was that some portion of the video be shot in a fruiting cherry orchard.

The video was a success. “Gigi became a superstar in Taiwan,” explains Teresa Baggarley of the Commission. “With that came a price tag beyond the budget of our growers, so we sought new stars. Next came Jessica, then Lillian Ho, and, most recently, eVonne, currently one of Taiwan’s biggest pop sensations.”

Over the past decade the Commission sponsored roughly a dozen music videos, all featuring beautiful, young, female singers. Seven of the songs have made it to the number one spot on Taiwan’s pop charts. (It helps that mtv Asia plays the videos every hour.) Each year the Commission released the videos to coincide with the peak of the Bing and Rainier cherry harvest from late June through early August; the singer participated in signings, interviews, and shows at grocery stores. For a yearly investment of approximately one hundred thousand dollars, the Commission estimates that it received annual advertising exposure worth roughly four million dollars.

The marketing campaign has worked. Taiwan, which imports 100 percent of its cherries, is now the second largest export market for Northwest cherries. In 1996, before the first video’s release, Taiwan imported 293,000 twenty-pound boxes of Northwest cherries; by 2001 the amount had grown to nearly eight-hundred thousand of these boxes. Export value also rose, increasing from less than eight million dollars to more than $51.5 million at its height. Thanks in part to the videos, the cherries have become more expensive, despite their greater availability. As Baggarley notes, cherries are now a status symbol, not unlike diamonds. In Taiwan, she says, “cherries are a girl’s best friend.”

The pop stars imbue the cherries with sexiness and youth, but the cherries themselves offer the allure of something exotic and foreign. The videos often depict an exaggerated, romanticized vision of America. In one recent video by eVonne, the star is shown driving along an open country road in a souped-up classic car; her journey is interrupted by shots of a couple smooshing on a carousel and little blonde girls dressed up for church playing in an orchard. Here is rural America at its most idealized. Several directors borrow heavily from American mythology. In one video Lillian Ho is driving through the barren, eastern Washington desert when her car breaks down. A handsome Native American man in face paint, wearing a leather shirt adorned with bones, talons, and white feathers, comes to her rescue by sweeping her onto his horse. Next she finds herself in a canoe with a team of Native American men paddling in unison. This video, like many others, ends with the singer triumphantly reaching an orchard where clusters of red Bing cherries glimmer in dappled sunlight amid emerald-green leaves. From the Native American men to this image of Shangri-la, the cherry experience is portrayed as fantasy. Eating this succulent morsel from the Northwest, the video implies, will transport you to a world of unimaginable pleasure.

With the recent downturn in Taiwan’s economy, cherry sales have slumped, and Andrew Willis believes that the videos may have reached their saturation point with young audiences. So the Commission has stopped its mtv video campaign and is focusing marketing efforts on the healthfulness of cherries. It is also putting more energy into the nascent Mainland Chinese market. Nevertheless, last summer the Commission contracted with three Taiwanese models—Mimi Liu, Novia Lin, and Tiffany Hui—to serve as cherry spokespersons. At a July press appearance they seductively ate cherry after cherry while talking about antioxidants and low-calorie count, their red-and-white gingham-lined picnic baskets in hand.

I recently e-mailed my Taiwanese friend Yi Pan to ask about the impact of the early mtv videos and their glamorous stars. She responded: “they are sweet girls! haha. maybe if i eat cherries like they do i will be pretty like them!!” Yi Pan was being tongue-in-cheek, I know, but her answer leaves no doubt: the marketing campaign worked its magic on her generation.

For a montage of the cherry videos by Zak Margolis, courtesy of Northwest Cherries, go to gastronomica.org and click under “Extras.”

The State of the Art

On the occasion of Gastronomica’s tenth anniversary, ten distinguished voices speak out about food culture today.

Over the last decade, restaurants have carried me on a trip to the future. Actually, it’s been two trips, in opposite directions.

First I went back to the future, to the first Slow Food Salone del Gusto in Turin, Italy. In order to keep traditional food culture alive, the Salone introduced treasured, handmade, small-production foods to the wide world. Everything was in the thousands. People. Food purveyors. Cheesemakers. Salamis. This exhibition and tasting of regional
food products was so enormous that we gave directions as “the street of smoked fish” or “halfway down the Italian sheep cheese road.” Sure enough, these samples of the past ignited an international passion for such culinary throwbacks as lardo, the slabs of fat (just fat!) cured by hardy peasants in the mountains of Italy. The wave of the future, it seemed, was not innovation, but preservation.

**Local** was the watchword. That might mean fish smoked no farther than ten miles away from where it’s taken on shore, or cheeses wrapped in leaves and buried in their home ground in an ancient Italian village— but served on a cheese plate in Manhattan. A decade later, modern restaurants in Baltimore and Minneapolis are featuring charcuterie plates and cheese courses with products that have never before ventured more than a few miles. This is not the flown-in turbot that 1950s “continental” restaurants boasted, or tropical fruit picked in its adolescence and shipped to “international” markets.

**This is food flavored with its culture.**

The other direction I traveled to the future was by way of Spain, where a restaurant as inaccessible as the most tradition-bound country salami maker was experimenting with temperature and texture, form and flavor, to create twenty-first-century innovations. El Bulli’s food labs in Catalan set off fireworks with foams and warm gels, encouraging budding deconstructionists and abstract expressionists in kitchens around the world. While Slow Food was campaigning against additives, star chefs worldwide were transforming familiar ingredients with gases and liquids, doing their shopping at the pharmacy.

**Lardo** was so last-century. In Chicago, Grant Achatz presented butterscotch-infused bacon on a mini-trapeze, while England’s Heston Blumenthal whisked bacon and eggs into instant ice cream. In Washington and Los Angeles José Andrés melded high and low, first course and dessert, as he wrapped foie gras in cotton candy.

Diners responded with gusto, catching on to the new freedom. The three-course meal was too confining. A bite of this and a slurp of that better suited the new millennium. In the “olden days” the elegant table presented rows of silver—start with the outside fork and knife—and clusters of glasses. Imagine that table set for a tasting menu at The French Laundry, three-dozen courses long. No, the preset table had to go. In fact, first courses began to be served already on their spoons. One quick bite and off you go, to the next mouthful of invention.

As the ever more dramatic parade of savories threatened to upstage dessert, dessert fought back with a tasting menu within the tasting menu. Caramel tastings, mango tastings—the Inn at Little Washington introduced its Seven Deadly Sins, a dessert assortment piped with colorful streaks of sauce to mimic the chef’s coat ready for the laundry. But one course wasn’t going to be enough. First came the pre-dessert, to get your mouth ready for the onslaught. Then came a small gift of sweets to take home for tomorrow’s breakfast.

**Rules are no longer relevant.**

Today a tasting menu might be forty-five courses long, yet nobody even flinches if you order just two appetizers as your whole meal, or share three dishes between two people. You can micromanage your dinner, choosing from five sauces, a dozen toppings, and four cooking methods for merely a hamburger. Or you can surrender to the kitchen for the chef’s menu, even have your wines chosen for you.

**Anything goes, as long as it is personalized.** At the haughtiest levels, waiters are introducing themselves. (“Hi, my name is Doris. I’ll be your waiter this evening.”) The chef makes a point of touring the dining room. Even your green beans and your pork chop are presented with their biographies.

**Daily life is full of anonymous encounters:** the Internet, the airport, the subway, the supermarket. Crowds to jostle, forms to fill out. E-mails greet you with mass-produced individuality. Dining out is the antidote: the host, the waiter, the chef with his pat on your shoulder, the season’s first acorn squash grown by farmers closer than your commute. You sit down to dinner and you have joined a community, a gastronomic Facebook.

**Phyllis Richman,** who retired as the *Washington Post* restaurant critic after twenty-three years, is the author of three restaurant mysteries, *including The Butter Did It.*

**The first ten years of Gastronomica’s life have been good ones for kitchen science, the subject I’ve been writing about since the late 1970s. It has developed enough of a following to support regular newspaper and magazine columns and a steadily lengthening shelf of books. It provides**
much of the material for a popular cable television show. It has even glittered with the reflected celebrity of chefs who brought lab equipment and materials into their experimental restaurants. In its own way, kitchen science has become fashionable.

This new prominence has come with a tasty side of irony. Kitchen science has practical value. It replaces unexamined lore about foods and cooking with facts arrived at through scrupulous background research and experiment. But the language of kitchen science now has its own value, independent of any facts. It’s a token of being in the know and at the cutting edge. And it’s sometimes deployed for that value alone, not to enlighten but to simulate enlightenment. The result is token kitchen science, a new form of lore disguised in the language of fine-grained analysis.

Molecules and their maneuvers are frequently invoked in food writing and food talk these days. But it’s often in order to rationalize the technique of the day rather than to examine and understand it, and often without the considerable trouble it can take to get the facts right. In the parallel universe of token kitchen science, sugars evaporate from roasted meat, and the roast’s water molecules seek refuge from the heat by gathering at its center. Pressure-cooker steam passes right through the densest foods. Cocktails made with special ice thrill the tongue because their molecules jump into motion from a near standstill just this side of absolute zero.

Such confabulating can be interesting in its own right when there’s more to it than carelessness or opportunism. I like that bartender’s imagination! And I sometimes sense hunger in the mix, hunger for intelligibility and for community that trumps hunger for the truth. During an online Q&A session I held at the New York Times in 2008, I let a dozen questions accumulate without responding. Then up popped a massive post from a reader identified as “Elizabeth,” who had taken the time and trouble to answer them all for me, at great length, with apparent sincerity, and with hardly a single accurate sentence. So fans of kitchen science need to be on their guard. Look at who’s purveying the science, whether it goes any deeper than a token term or two, whether there’s any evidence offered. Real nourishment takes some chewing.


In the United States a decade of increasing refinement in sauces and edible exotica has kept pace with a vertiginous decline of competence in our home kitchens. Be not misled, Gastronomica readers—we are a nation of nearly three hundred million. Talented and sophisticated chefs refashion for us Thai, Japanese, and nearly every other cuisine known to humankind. We are exhorted to try new foods and are served up unending choices, as if the aim of eating were never to eat the same food in the same way twice. The results of this intense experimentation are about what one might expect: one or two interesting innovations, and many novelties that are not really so hot. And by the time the foam gets to Des Moines, it is either too foamy or not foamy enough.

The American food system, meanwhile, assisted by its many friends in Congress, has continued to deliver farm bills that reward corporate farming at the cost of the taxpayers and small farmers, while showing a princely disregard for the health consequences. So far, outbreaks of food-borne disease have not yet been deadly enough to make a decisive political difference. Still, that day may be coming nearer.

Though readers and TV viewers have grown tired of the grossly obese, a quarter of those jaded readers and viewers are now overweight themselves, and their numbers are growing. It is nearly gallows humor to observe that we Americans are growing fatter at a slower rate. The unmistakable links of childhood obesity to our food system on the one hand, and to matters of health on the other, cannot be hidden.

Oddly, perhaps, the two most important culinary events in the decade were last year’s economic crash and the arrival of a new national administration. Our newspapers and magazines are full of food-related stories tied to these big changes. We are told that people who must now adapt to declining means are cooking both more and more economically. They are probably eating out, eating take-out, and ordering in less often and more thriftily. If cooking at home does improve, the health benefits could be real. Consumers may tire of their roles as part-time,
involuntary, and unpaid health inspectors for the fast-food and frozen-food companies. If they do, they may yet discover that actually cooking potatoes and carrots can be fun, as well as economical.

Perhaps the national annual per capita caloric intake will decline. If only by one meatless meal per week to save money, it would be a salutary sacrifice. Over time it might lead to a new grasp of the idea that value added does not always improve food, even if it is good for the food companies. What a wonderful discovery that would be!

The new administration, while seizing initiatives for family gardening and healthful eating, has also made some smashing appointments at the Centers for Disease Control, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and the U.S. Public Health Service. Although it may never be able to tame the food industry enough to push Congress into an agriculture bill for all Americans, its actions so far represent a decisive break with the recent past.

But so far, the big guys remain unshakably loyal to technological solutions, resolutely ignoring the way some problems stay insoluble unless there are changes in the social arrangements of production. Instead, we’re getting a new generation of brilliant advertisements, artfully grounded in a conception of science that is deliberately narrow enough to convince us that yes, they can. The problem seems to be that while yes, they could, no, they won’t.

Will the next ten years be truly different? Our grandchildren hope so.

Sidney W. Mintz is Research Professor in Anthropology at Johns Hopkins University and the author, most recently, of the forthcoming Three Ancient Colonies.

Imagine! A mere decade ago I went to a book to look up a recipe and to a stove to cook a meal. Now I need neither book nor stove. And who needs real food? I can stuff myself with thousands of images of food on Flickr, share them with thousands of new friends on Facebook, and critique them with millions of strangers on Twitter. It’s as if food were the new sex, a hot connection, a fantasy of finger-lickin’ porn. But watching somebody screw or cook is not at all the same as actually screwing or cooking some hot dish yourself. We don’t watch sexy Rachael or Bobby on the boob tube because we’re hungry for food. They seduce us with Fast Food for the imagination, as illusory as the vitamins and minerals in sugar and fat.

But if our bodies grow fat from “conditioned hypereating,” don’t our minds grow flabby from conditioned hyperviewing? Digitalized food, like digitalized sex, is without context. Who is sending out the signals, from what place, at what time, and above all why? Place and time are annihilated by digital abstraction—on, off. It’s as if all the richness of human experience were reduced to binary data, as if there were only the one way to plug in and turn on.

I resent that all our physical senses are reduced to sight alone through Windows Vista. What a paltry narrowing of arousal. Watching a YouTube of someone cooking breakfast, I don’t smell the bacon frying or hear the sizzle of eggs or feel on my fingertips the crispness of freshly toasted bread. Nor do I savor on my tongue the creaminess of butter melting, the chewiness of pork muscle countering the fat, the liquid explosion of a yolk after the silkiness of the white. It’s not too much information that seduces us, but the reduction of all experience to information of only one kind. It’s as if all sex were a one-night stand.

E.M. Forster would laugh aloud if he knew what had happened to his preaching, “Only connect.” By hyperconnecting, we’ve shortcircuited our bodies from our computerized brains. I used to feel that food grounded us in our animal selves, in the earthy reality of creaturehood. Now I feel ever more distanced from my own hearty appetites and from the lusts of others. Don’t Twitter me what you ate for breakfast, but sit down on a real chair at a real table over a steaming cup of coffee and tell me what you desire and why. Tell me who you are at this particular time and place. Tell me what you long for, tell me about your hunger for power or fame or riches or comfort or revenge or love. Please just tell me in person and don’t link me in.

Betty Fussell is a culinary historian and the author of The Story of Corn, My Kitchen Wars, and Raising Steaks.

As someone who has come relatively recently to the field of food history, I’ve learned a lot from Gastronomica over its ten-year history. Well, anyone would, given its range, wit, and particular
combination of attention to food and its cultural context. Although my academic field is medieval European history, I’ve often found the articles about modern food and especially restaurants the most fascinating. Among my favorites is Giles MacDonogh’s study of the elegant Madrid restaurant Horcher and its previous (before 1943) incarnation in Berlin (“Otto Horcher: Caterer to the Third Reich,” February 2007). It’s a particularly disturbing example of the restaurant as a location for elite sociability.

The last ten years have seen two developments that intrigue me, one within the academic world and the other a more general American cultural phenomenon: greater attention to food among historians and a rediscovery of the actual quality and taste of what we consume. Social historians were always interested in nutrition and subsistence in terms of how ordinary people were able to survive, but they tended to dismiss the history of cuisine (i.e., the preferences of the relatively comfortable) as frivolous. The impact of fashion and consumer behavior on economic and social change has recently been explored but food is now also seen as the intersection of a number of historical factors and conditions, from environmental conditions to globalization to gender. Teaching courses in the history of food has been surprisingly gratifying, in part because I used to think of college students as rather phobic about diet, health, and body image. Binge eating, cycles of avoidance of certain foods, Cheerios 247 were my background notions, but I found among students in my classes a concern to find out where what we eat comes from as well as delight and uninhibited enjoyment of food.

The rediscovery of taste might seem an exaggerated way to describe shifts in attitudes, but from the nineteenth century on, foreign observers have consistently commented on Americans’ preference for variety, luxurious display, and new gimmicks over the actual quality of food. Whatever their excesses and peculiarities, the locavorism and seasonal movements have reoriented the experience of dining toward freshness, depth, and complexity and away from texture, color, and blandness. How much further progress will be made remains to be discovered. Will people who claim sophistication about food actually cook at home? How far away from the urban greenmarkets will the preference for the local, sustainable, natural, and flavorful spread? Will restaurants in New York City ever value quiet and tranquility? I look forward to the next ten years of Gastronomica for both answers and more questions.

Paul Freedman is the Chester D. Tripp Professor of History at Yale University and the editor of Food: The History of Taste.

I started studying food as a graduate student in the 1970s. The subject seemed well suited to my ambition to be a scholar/activist. The scholarly opportunities were clear: virtually no one had studied food so far, so it was full of the mysteries and surprises that attract researchers. (To be sure, the field was so surprising that stunned deans would blurt, “Food, for God’s sake!” and, perhaps the kiss of death among sober academics, “Sounds like fun!”) As for activism, what could be more immediate, compelling, motivating, troubling, and relevant than food?

Thirty years later, the subject no longer surprises deans, for good food scholarship abounds. And so does activism. But I will now admit that I’m not so sure that the two go together. The activist wants to be useful; the scholar wants to be accurate. In the former role I find myself—primarily as a public speaker and source for journalists—pushed to simplify research insights for a non-specialist audience that often knows less than my undergraduates. Yet as a teacher/researcher I try to “complicate” life for students. The activist values succinctness and accessibility, while the academic values lengthy, often inconclusive arguments—indeed, the less conclusive the better, as the scholar’s job is to resist simple answers. In the public advocacy role, however, the goal is answers and usually no more than can be accommodated in a single PowerPoint slide, sound bite, or elevator pitch. How to find a balance, especially when the public-advocacy opportunities are growing for us in food studies? Some of us have even written bestsellers and are asked to formulate clear “rules for eating.” I can’t think of anything more relevant than that, but is it right?

My own inclination at this point is to be wary of advocacy. It’s too easy for us academics, especially in the lowly humanities, to be seduced by the star treatment, which may tempt us to believe that we really know...
the answers, which is anathema to the process of scholarly inquiry and contradiction. And yet I’m not quite comfortable retreating to the more conventional safety zone of pure research and theory, however important that is. I still feel some need to reach out, to be influential, even if only in a cautionary way. I especially feel a commitment to the sustainable food movement, which I’ve been tracking for a long time. In over forty years of discussion with activists, I’ve come to see myself as something of a cranky corrective to radical exuberance, a friendly fellow traveler who wants to make sure that the countercuisine doesn’t go the way of other leftwing movements, which is to crash and burn. I think, in particular, that those of us who are scholars have something to share about the dangers of party lines, leftwing paranoia, and the tendency to tar opponents as guilty by association. We need to try to expand the vocabulary of analysis beyond words that are so overused as to be meaningless, e.g., industrial, junk, commercial, conventional, healthy, chemical, natural, organic, and sustainable. The mass-culture indictment of American food needs a rest. If activists can learn to love American television and music, they can also learn to respect American food, along with the people who produce and consume it. And we need to declare a moratorium on nostalgia. At the same time we need to invent better stories, better myths to live by. Finally, perhaps we need to decide if there’s a difference between a public intellectual and a public advocate. Following the fine example of Gastronomica, are there ways to bring the best of the scholarly process to a wider public without watering it down or compromising its subversive ambivalence?

Warren Belasco is professor of American studies at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and the author of Food: The Key Concepts.

Ten years ago it was just a dream, a vision, that one might be able to create and sustain a serious journal on matters gastronomic that would interest both scholars and the general public. But Darra Goldstein, supported by friends and colleagues, pursued this, her dream, her vision. At first, the question was whether there would be enough scholars who could and would write well enough and on diverse enough subjects to sustain such a journal. And could financial backing be found?

Now, ten years later, these questions have been answered in the affirmative. Gastronomica has become the journal of record. All would agree that it is beautiful to look at and that its diversity of subject matter is astonishing. Many new scholars have been introduced in its pages, and many new avenues for culinary research have been opened. Bravo to all involved.

When Gastronomica first appeared, popular and academic interest in food and foodways had already begun to blossom. Over the last ten years, it has, perhaps, become overblown. Blogs, television, radio, the Internet and all its new permutations, conferences, symposia, specialized journals and magazines present an overwhelming array of choices. In many cases serious culinary history seems to have been overtaken by celebrity, glitz, and frivolity."

I hope this trend may have run its course. For one thing, all over the world people are becoming more interested in their culinary heritage. They want to learn more, and to share what they learn. Interest in our work at the Janice Bluestein Longone Culinary Archive at the University of Michigan’s Clements Library has grown exponentially. We have welcomed the extra workload, as it reflects what is increasingly clear: culinary history has been accepted as another way—an important and too-long-ignored way—to view history. Universities, museums, publishers have all come to the table. The table is bountiful and copious. I trust that the future of culinary history is bright.

"Frivolity: “Of little or no weight, worth or importance; not worthy of serious notice; characterized by lack of seriousness or sense.”

Jan Longone is curator of American culinary history at the Clements Library, University of Michigan.

Ever more safe treyf. To my eye, that’s the most noteworthy change in American foodways over the last decade or two. The reason for the increase is simple: the fewer foods that qualify as kosher to believers in one or another of the myriad contemporary food dogmas, the greater the demand for safe treyf.

But before I get to that, a word about the term, which I borrow from a study that sociologists Gaye
Tuchman and Harry Levine undertook in the 1980s in response to an oft-repeated joke in the Jewish community: “Why did the Jews starve for the first thousand years of our existence? Because, according to the Jewish calendar the year is 5700-something, and according to the Chinese calendar, it’s 4700-something. For a thousand years, Jews went without Chinese food.” From their analyses of interviews and archival materials Tuchman and Levine developed an explanation for the immense popularity of Chinese food among New York Jews dating back to the early 1900s. Chinese food functions, they suggest, as safe treyf. Although some dishes contain treyf, these nonkosher ingredients like pork and shrimp are minced and blended during cooking so that they lose their distinctive taste and texture. And in line with another of the laws for keeping kosher, Chinese dishes do not mix milk and meat. Their interviewees told Tuchman and Levine that Chinese food is “close enough” to kosher that they could eat it without feeling guilty.

A range of marketers, food activists, and individual eaters say much the same about foods they hawk to others or consume themselves. Perhaps the best-known example from the food industry is the Pork Board’s “other white meat” campaign, a brilliant ruse to turn the ultimate nonkosher food into safe treyf. The ongoing campaign, which associates pork with chicken rather than beef, dates back to the late 1980s, when a host of health writers and food activists were singling out red meat as particularly heinous.

More recently, organizations as diverse as Jenny Craig and the Chef’s Collaborative have promoted an extraordinary range of safe treyf, Sweets sold as low-calorie, low-fat, low-sugar, low-salt, or low-carb (or any pair or trio of these). Grass-fed, free-range, antibiotic-free meat. Troll-caught, dolphin-safe, low-on-the-food-chain fish. Produce grown, if not in the locality where it is being sold, close enough to be labeled “local.” Coffee identified as fair trade, shade grown, or organic.

Depending upon one’s dietary ideology, some or all of that list is either heaven sent or demonic, but one thing is certain. Part-time adherents to the ever-expanding list of secular dietary laws have more and more options for feeding themselves.


Barry Glassner is professor of sociology at the University of Southern California and the author of *The Gospel of Food.*

On the whole this has been a pretty good ten years for the world of food. It’s taken us a while, but we’ve finally begun to gain a little perspective on the culinary craze that spawned in the sixties, flowered in the seventies, and exploded supernova-like in the eighties. The excesses that come with any fad have surely not disappeared, but some encouraging signs can be seen: Our “foodies,” bless them, are beginning, mercifully, to abandon many of their gaudy displays of erudition and kitchen virtuosity, settling for social acclaim in greener, more fashionable fields. Dates and mates are less often sought for such prestigious qualities as their knife skills or exhaustive knowledge of wine vintages. The food fiction pandemic (“has all the poetry, all the brilliance of Like Water for Chocolate!!”) is beginning to lose its grip (although food memoirs, alas, continue to appear more reliably than ants at a picnic). The big-money think tanks and institutes of higher education in food popping up around the world are being cut down to size and have begun to offer something more than fluffy courses and pose but empty conferences. The field of food studies has begun to appreciate that producing and delivering the food we eat is a good sturdy trade and that arcana and jargon may help win higher degrees but do not always add much to making us better and more wisely fed. And, to all our credit, the designation “Celebrity Chef,” while still very much in use, is now not invariably a sign of unmitigated admiration.

But the diminution of glut and pretence is surely not the only happy sign. There have been other positive changes. The broader understanding of food as a lynchpin component of culture has given it a new and much-needed standing in many areas of study, ranging from history and anthropology to medicine and environmental studies. Food history in particular has exploded as a subject of interest, some of the best work being done by motivated amateurs who ask...
new questions and learn what they learn by fresh thinking, not necessarily by adhering to the methodologies and vocabulary of any specific discipline. Our new awareness has also opened our minds to adventurous thinking about which foods and food habits are acceptable and which, perhaps, may no longer be. We have begun to produce and handle our food in more intelligent ways, ways that are better for our bodies and kinder to the earth. We have been introduced to a whole range of new looks, new flavors, and new textures, which challenge the cook and broaden the palate and enliven the eating experience. Some of the innovations are, to be sure, extreme, the product of play and experimentation. As with radical innovation in any field, from fashion to music, most will fall by the wayside, but a few will stick, becoming part of the permanent repository of choices we draw on as we define and redefine our food culture.

It has been an exciting, richly active ten years, characterized by many excesses, which, all for the good, have been softening, but also by some rewarding giant steps that will continue to reshape the way we get and consume our food for years to come.

Nach Waxman is the proprietor of Kitchen Arts & Letters bookstore in New York City.

In Britain the beginning of the decade was marked by BSE and foot-and-mouth disease, the unnecessary slaughter of hundreds of animals, scare-mongering journalism, and muddled government statements. The short-term, shortsighted policies to provide cheap food that led to this situation have not improved significantly, and the need for a responsible long-term food strategy is still not fully addressed by government.

The population seems to be leading—or pushing—the politicians, with demands to know about animal welfare, the provenance and sustainability of food supplies. The state of fish stocks comes up regularly in the media, supermarkets name suppliers and increasingly offer locally produced fruits and vegetables, farm husbandry is examined, breeds are named, and rare breeds once neglected in the push for cheap meat are again bred more widely. Small independent cheesemakers have multiplied in the last ten years; orchards are being replanted with traditional varieties of fruit formerly scorned for their low cropping or uneven shapes. Some local foods are once again being made more scrupulously to traditional recipes.

Food miles for transporting organic food are under scrutiny, and the local is finding favor. This is shown in the increase in farmers’ markets up and down the country and, since the economic downturn, in the number of applications for allotments—garden lots rented from the local council—and of families growing food in their gardens, terraces, or window boxes. There are many references to how the British coped during World War II, when lawns were turned into vegetable patches. “Grow your own” is the current slogan; garden centers and gardening writers devote space to salad, vegetable, and soft-fruit plants; tomatoes, lettuces, and herbs sprout on London doorsteps.

Breadmaking is on the increase for the first time since the 1970s, and decreased spending power has led to a move away from ready meals to more frequent home cooking.

Provenance, sustainability, and ethics are now topics on a number of the United Kingdom’s TV food shows, at last following the lead of BBC Radio 4’s influential Food Programme. Upscale restaurants have got the message, too, with details of source and breeding on their menus.

Lest this should all seem a shade utopian, I must point out that the widening poverty gap over the last decade means that many families find it even harder to feed themselves, and to do so healthily is an enormous challenge. Obesity and related diseases are not decreasing. A lot of low-quality fast food is still consumed.

For those of us in the food community, in the last decade Gastronomica has provided a welcome means of exchanging news and information; it has brought in many new readers. The journal has broadened my perspective on many aspects of food and food culture, and I thank Darra for that and wish her and Gastronomica success for the next ten years.

Jill Norman is a London-based food and wine writer, whose books include Herbs & Spices, Winter Food, and The New Penguin Cookery Book.